Columns
Social Justice



A group of women hold torches as they protest against the military coup in Yangon, Myanmar, July 14, 2021. People from all walks of life in Myanmar observed a "silent strike" in defiance of the ruling junta Feb. 1, 2022, the anniversary of the military coup. (CNS/Reuters)

by Anonymous

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Due to fear of potential repercussions, the author has chosen to remain anonymous.

The people of Myanmar, already living in constant fear because of military incursions on villages and towns, experienced a huge 7.7 magnitude earthquake in March that destroyed more homes and properties. The following account reflects the experience of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, from the military government takeover of the national government in 2021 to the present.

One recent atrocity committed by the government was the brutal murder of a young priest in February, but atrocities are daily events. Our country, Myanmar, has been facing a devastating civil war fueled by the military government since 2021, and the situation is only getting worse. The military seized power and unlawfully imprisoned President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. Protests were organized at that time, but as the military began killing protestors, many civilians — fearing death — fled into the forests to survive.

In the places where the military was losing jurisdiction, women and girls were raped and killed, but that has not been enough for them. They also brought their cruelty to ethnic groups who suffer immensely when their homes are burned and destroyed. They have no shelters to protect themselves.

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Mogkok, one of our largest cities where our sisters have a convent, was occupied early on by the military. On July 17, 2023 a large bomb fell near the entrance gate of their convent and school. By the grace of God, it did not explode. The sisters took refuge with the boarders in a safe bomb shelter. Many parishioners of the area fled to the western part of Mogkok, as well as to Loikaw's Cathedral and other churches and convents. At that time, the road to Mandalay was blocked, preventing travel. Occupation was and is not just their presence, but includes bombing that continues to threaten people who frequently have to seek refuge in bomb shelters.

Living under harsh military rule has brought severe hardships to families. Most areas of the country suffer without electricity, and people have lost jobs, leaving them without any way to get an income. There are general food shortages, and the prices have skyrocketed. Many families are surviving only on rice porridge, when they can get rice. There is no gasoline for those wishing to escape. Despair continues to grow among them, and some fear that being without food for long periods, they will become disabled. Every day, we hear people saying they can no longer endure the

hardships. They speak openly of wanting to die.

Some people escape through the forest on motorcycles, a journey that takes three nights to four days. At times it can take weeks to flee to the safe places. On hearing these stories of escape, one of our sisters said that to die by a bullet would be better than walking barefoot, on an empty stomach, and a thirsty mouth on the muddy road for days.

As fighting continued with bombs, airstrikes destroying houses and schools, and people abandoning their homes or dying, Mogkok became like a deserted cemetery. No matter what choice was made, to try to escape or stay, everyone faced extreme hardship.



People in northwestern Myanmar displaced by fighting between junta forces and anti-junta fighters walk in Chin state May 31, 2021. (CNS/Reuters)

On July 25 of the same year, two of our sisters came to take refuge in Aung Pandang's convent due to the ongoing conflict between military forces and civilians

in Mogkok. Then, in Aung Pandang on August 2, bombs were intentionally or accidentally thrown into that village. This bomb fell within the convent compound, terrifying the sisters, who ran for safety. Thanks be to God, the sisters were not hit directly. The only thing penetrated by the bomb that day were habits hanging upstairs.

The sister in charge of cooking that day, who was closest to the bomb explosion, was saved by the grace of God. She had just moved a bit to one side from where she regularly prepares the food, otherwise she would have been hit directly on the head and killed on the spot.

Fear and distress weighed heavily on the sisters. Nowhere was or is completely safe. There were and still are times when everyone gathers in bomb shelters, hoping to survive. The sisters and the people of the area endured long nights of hunger and anxious hearts, sleeping without food or water.

Eventually, throughout the country, all communication, electricity and internet services were completely cut off. Thieves took advantage of the chaos and broke into convents and churches, smashing locks to gain entry. They stole money from donation boxes in the church and chapel, searching for any valuables they could uncover.

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The situation remains unstable. With the constant threat of airstrikes, all of us live day-to-day with fear and wait our turn to possibly die as we look up at the jet fighters flying over our heads. They take anything valuable before burning down family houses and even their fields.

Many of our relatives were accused of being part of the People Defense Force. They have been beheaded, and their heads were hung on fences to frighten the villagers. They have also burned dead bodies or thrown them into septic tanks. Other times, they buried bombs under the bodies of our relatives, hoping to kill those trying to recover their loved ones.

We, the sisters — especially those in Upper Myanmar, Chin State, Lashio, Loikaw, and Myitkyina — have taken great risks to remain with the people, even as fighting rages between defense forces and the military. At times, we have had to abandon

our convents and seek refuge in the forest, living among the displaced. Without food or shelter, we have slept sitting up, our stomachs empty. Yet our faith has remained steadfast, and our spirits unshaken.

We continue working with parishioners to provide food and assistance as much as we can. We are trying to be pilgrims of hope, like Pope Francis invited us to. These are only a few stories of how our sisters have survived and continue to survive.

King of Peace, bring us peace!

King of Just, give us justice!