

## International

# Suu Kyi faces court as UN envoy warns of Myanmar civil war

## Death toll reaches 535 as junta represses protests

**YANGON:** Myanmar's ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi faced a court hearing yesterday, after a UN envoy warned of the risk of civil war and an imminent "bloodbath" as the junta represses pro-democracy protests. More than 535 people have died in daily demonstrations since the military overthrew Suu Kyi on February 1, halting Myanmar's decade-old experiment in democracy.

The UN Security Council held an urgent closed-door session on the escalating crisis on Wednesday, and special envoy Christine Schraner Burgener urged it to act. "I appeal to this council to consider all available tools to take collective action and do what is right, what the people of Myanmar deserve," she said, in remarks obtained by AFP.

She said she remained open to dialogue with the junta but added: "If we wait only for when they are ready to talk, the ground situation will only worsen. A bloodbath is imminent." The emergency UN session came on the eve of Suu Kyi's latest court hearing—she faces a raft of criminal charges that could see her barred from office for life. Her legal team on Wednesday held their first meeting with her-by video link in a police station—since she was ousted and detained in the early hours of February 1. The 75-year-old has not been seen in public, but her lawyers said she appeared to be in good health despite two months in detention.

The hearing was expected to be brief, and to deal only with administrative aspects of the case. The junta is also probing the Nobel laureate over



**MANDALAY:** This photo taken and received courtesy of an anonymous source via Facebook yesterday shows protesters taking part in a demonstration against the military coup in Mandalay. — AFP

allegations she took payments of gold and more than \$1 million in cash, but Khin Maung Zaw, one of her lawyers, said these were not likely to translate into formal charges at this stage. A group of ousted MPs from Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), who have been working underground against the junta, have announced plans for "a new civilian government" in the first week of April.

They announced that Myanmar's military-drafted 2008 constitution was "cancelled", and yesterday a group of protesters burned a pile of copies

in the street in Yangon. Two military-owned supermarkets in Yangon were set on fire overnight, local media reported.

### China caution

Britain's UN envoy Barbara Woodward said the Security Council was "united in its condemnation" and was discussing "a range of measures at our disposal". But China, considered an important ally of Myanmar, ruled out sanctions or other "coercive measures". China's UN ambassador Zhang Jun also

### Massive rally

The group was prosecuted for organizing an unauthorized assembly on August 18, 2019 — one of the biggest in Hong Kong that year as people took to the streets calling for democracy and greater police accountability. Organizers claimed 1.7 million people turned out—almost one in four Hong Kong residents—though that number was difficult to independently verify.

It was easily one of the biggest rallies that year, with dense crowds marching peacefully for hours under a sea of umbrellas and thundery skies. Protests in Hong Kong can only go ahead with the permission of authorities and rights groups have long criticized the use of unauthorized assembly prosecutions. British lawyer David Perry, hired by the Hong Kong government to be the lead prosecutor, stepped down following withering criticism from both the UK government and British legal bodies over his decision to take the job.

Prosecutors accused the group of defying police instructions that day and encouraging crowds to march across Hong Kong's main island, bringing traffic disruption. In her verdict, district Judge AJ Woodcock indicated that she was inclined to go for a maximum jail sentence and said the fact the march was peaceful was no defense.

"It cannot be right for an offender to argue that although his act was unauthorized... but because it was ultimately peaceful and there was no violence he should not be arrested, prosecuted or convicted," she wrote. —AFP

Some struck a defiant tone outside court yesterday morning ahead of the verdict, holding banners that read "protest political suppression". "We are very proud even if we have to go to jail for it," Lee Cheuk-yan, a former legislator and labor leader told reporters. "We will still march on no matter what lies in the future." Seven were found guilty of organizing and knowingly participating in an unauthorised assembly. Two others had previously pleaded guilty. They face up to five years in jail.



**HONG KONG:** Former lawmaker Cyd Ho (center) and pro-democracy activist Lee Cheuk-yan (right) speak to the media outside West Kowloon court in Hong Kong yesterday after being found guilty of organizing an unauthorized assembly on August 18, 2019. — AFP

## Veteran Hong Kong activists convicted over democratic rally

**HONG KONG:** Nine veteran Hong Kong activists face jail after they were convicted yesterday for their roles in organizing one of the biggest democracy protests to engulf the city in 2019. The defendants included some of Hong Kong's most prominent pro-democracy campaigners, many of whom are non-violence advocates who have spent decades campaigning in vain for universal suffrage.

They are the latest group of democracy figures to be prosecuted as China oversees a sweeping crackdown on dissent following seven straight months of democracy protests in the financial hub.

Among them are Martin Lee, an 82-year-old barrister who was once chosen by Beijing to help write Hong Kong's mini-constitution, and Margaret Ng, a 73-year-old barrister and former opposition lawmaker. Media tycoon Jimmy Lai, currently in custody after his arrest under Beijing's new national security law, was among those convicted.

Leung Kwok-hung, an opposition politician known by his sobriquet "Long Hair" who has also been detained on national security charges, was also sent down. Others are leading members of the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), the coalition that organized a series of huge rallies throughout 2019.

called for the protection of foreign businesses—a key concern for China, which has seen dozens of its factories torched amid anger against Beijing.

The US State Department has ordered the departure of non-essential diplomatic staff and their families from Myanmar, and Japan—a top donor to the country—has halted new aid payments. Linda Thomas Greenfield, the US ambassador to the United Nations, raised the possibility of action if the military does not step down.

If "they continue the attacks that they were making on civilian populations, then we have to look at how we might do more", she told reporters. German company Giesecke+Devrient, which supplies raw materials to Myanmar's central bank for the production of bank notes, announced Wednesday it was suspending deliveries. French renewable energy giant Voltalia said it was also withdrawing from the country because of the political and humanitarian crisis.

Fears are growing that a broader conflict could erupt in a country plagued for decades by on-off fighting between the military and rebel ethnic armies. Several of Myanmar's 20 or so armed ethnic groups, who control large areas of territory mostly in border regions, have voiced their opposition to the coup and crackdown. Three of them—the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army and the Arakan Army—on Wednesday threatened to join the protesters' fight against the military. —AFP

## China seeks 'democratic transition' in Myanmar

**UNITED NATIONS:** China on Wednesday said it wanted a "democratic transition" in military-ruled Myanmar, but ruled out sanctions at a UN Security Council meeting. "China hopes that Myanmar will restore peace, stability and constitutional order as early as possible and continue to steadily advance democratic transition," Ambassador Zhang Jun told the closed-door meeting, according to a statement.

"Maintaining peace and stability in Myanmar is in the common interest of the international community. Should Myanmar slide into protracted turbulence, it will be a disaster for Myanmar and the region as a whole," he said. Myanmar's military, which overthrew the country's elected leadership on February 1 and has violently suppressed protests, counts on China as its main ally.

China nonetheless remained consistent in its opposition to economic pressure on Myanmar after the closed-door meeting in which Western powers spoke of further measures. "One-sided pressure and calling for sanctions or other coercive measures will only aggravate tension and confrontation and further complicate the situation, which is by no means constructive," Zhang said. —AFP