

## International

# Myanmar's activists splash red paint to protest junta bloodshed

## 'Bleeding dye strike' latest creative method by protestors to voice opposition

**YANGON:** Myanmar activists daubed roadways with red paint yesterday to protest against the junta's bloody crackdown on protests, as an online fundraising drive to support the movement neared the \$10 million mark. The country has been in turmoil since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1, rocked by daily clashes between protestors and authorities that have left at least 570 people dead.

Ten of Myanmar's ethnic rebel armies voiced support for the protest movement at the weekend, stoking fears that the country could slide into broader civil conflict, while the United Nations has warned of a looming "bloodbath". Yesterday, in the commercial capital Yangon, people smeared red paint and handprints on bus stops and pavements in protest at the military's violence.

The so-called "bleeding dye strike" is the latest creative method thought up by protestors to voice opposition without risking being shot or arrested by demonstrating in person.

One slogan painted on a bus stop said the military was being misled to protect junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, and urged soldiers not to shoot civilians. In the city of Hpa-an in eastern Karen state, youths sprayed red paint on the road, giving the three-fingered salute borrowed from the "Hunger Games" books and films that has become symbolic of the movement.

Yesterday also saw rallies in the second biggest city Mandalay, as well as in Karen, and Kachin state in the north. In the southern city of Dawei, hundreds of people marched peacefully carrying yellow padauk flowers, normally associated with Myanmar's new year water festival which starts next week.

### Fundraising push

In one part of Yangon, locals organized a food sharing drive to help poor families struggling to make ends meet, encouraging people who could afford it to donate spare ingredients. Meanwhile an online fundraising push by a group of ousted MPs from Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) is nearing \$10 million. The Committee for Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) — the Burmese word for parliament — says the money will be used to "uproot the military dictatorship" and restore democracy.

More than 2,700 people have been arrested since the coup, according to local monitoring group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which says at least 570 people have been confirmed killed, including 47 children. The authorities have issued arrest warrants for 80 celebrities including singers, models and social media influencers — most of whom are in hiding — accusing them of spreading information that could cause mutiny in the armed forces.

Local media and the BBC's Burmese service reported that famed satirist and activist Zarganar, jailed four times under previous military regimes, had been arrested.

### 'Inappropriate interference'

The coup and crackdown have drawn outrage and sanctions from world powers, as well as prompting several international companies to suspend business in Myanmar. But the pressure has yet to tell on the generals, who have shown little sign of stepping back from their efforts to suppress protests. And yesterday, which has sought to build ties with the junta, joined China in publicly rejecting sanctions against Myanmar. News agency Interfax



This handout photo from Eindu Youths taken and received yesterday shows protesters holding up the three finger salute in front of red paint splashed on the road, representing blood spilled during protests against the military coup, in Hpa-an township in Myanmar's Karen state. —AFP

quoted a Russian foreign ministry spokesperson as warning "threats and pressure" could push Myanmar closer to "full-blown civil conflict".

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian restated Beijing's opposition to "inappropriate interference" in Myanmar. But he said China backed

a summit of regional bloc ASEAN to discuss the crisis-mooted by Malaysia and Brunei's leaders after talks on Monday. The Myanmar military has defended seizing power, pointing to fraud allegations around last November's general election, won by the NLD. —AFP

## Indonesia, East Timor flood death toll surges past 160

**LEMBATA, Indonesia:** Rescuers were searching for dozens of people still missing yesterday after floods and landslides swept away villages in Indonesia and East Timor, killing more than 160 people and leaving thousands more homeless. Torrential rains from Tropical Cyclone Seroja turned small communities into wastelands of mud, uprooted trees and sent around 10,000 people fleeing to shelters across the neighboring Southeast Asian nations.

Indonesia's disaster management agency said it had recorded 130 deaths in a cluster of remote islands near East Timor, where another 34 have been officially listed as dead since the disaster struck on Sunday. Search and rescue teams in Indonesia were racing to find more than 70 people still missing and using diggers to clear mountains of debris.

The storm swept buildings in some villages down a mountainside and to the shore of the ocean on Lembata island, where some small communities have been wiped off the map.

"This area will never be inhabited again," said Lembata district official Eliyaser Yentji Sunur, referring to a flattened part of Waimatan village.

"We won't let people live here. Like it or not, they'll have to relocate."

Waimatan resident Onesimus Sili said floods early Sunday destroyed his community before anyone knew what was happening. "Around midnight, we heard a very loud rumbling sound and we thought it was a nearby volcano erupting," he told AFP.

"By the time we realized that it was a flash flood, the houses were already gone." Authorities in both nations were scrambling to shelter evacuees while trying to prevent any spread of COVID-19. Yesterday, East Timor recorded its first virus death — a 44-year-old woman — since the pandemic broke out last year. The tiny half-island nation of 1.3 million sandwiched between Indonesia and Australia, officially known as Timor-Leste, quickly shut down its borders to avoid a widespread outbreak that threatened to overwhelm its creaky health care system.

But the disaster has heightened fears of a spike in cases as thousands cram into shelters across Timor's inundated capital Dili and elsewhere.

### 'Clothes on their back'

Local officials in Lembata were bracing for its meager health facilities to be overwhelmed as the number of injured coming from isolated villages soars. "These evacuees fled here with just wet clothes on their backs and nothing else," said the area's deputy mayor, Thomas Ola Longaday.

"They need blankets, pillows, mattresses and tents." There was also a dire shortage of trained doctors.



Villagers carry the body of a victim after flash floods in Lembata, East Flores Monday as torrential rains triggered floods and landslides that have killed at least 91 people and left dozens missing in Indonesia and neighboring East Timor. —AFP

"We don't have enough anesthesiologists and surgeons, but we've been promised that help will come," Longaday said. "Many survivors have broken bones because they were hit by rocks, logs and debris." Nearby in East Flores municipality, torrents of mud washed over homes, bridges and roads.

Earlier images from Indonesia's search and rescue agency showed workers digging up mud-covered corpses before placing them in body bags. Hospitals, bridges and thousands of homes were damaged or destroyed by the storm, which is now moving toward the west coast of Australia. —AFP

## Bangladesh ferry disaster death toll mounts to 34

**NARAYANGANJ, Bangladesh:** The death toll from a ferry accident in Bangladesh at the weekend rose to at least 34 after six more bodies were retrieved, officials said yesterday. The ferry packed with around 50 passengers heading home from the central city of Narayanganj ahead of an impending coronavirus lockdown had collided with a larger cargo vessel late on Sunday.

Authorities called off a search-and-rescue mission on Monday after salvaging the ship from the heavily polluted Shitalakshya river and recovering 22 bodies. But under pressure from relatives of people still missing, rescuers late Monday resumed operations with helicopters to scour the murky waters for any more bodies.

"Based on the relatives' account, at least two people are still missing," local official Mustain Billah told AFP. Under Bangladesh's seven-day lockdown in response to surging COVID cases, all domestic travel services were suspended on Monday and shops and malls were shut. Ferry accidents are common in Bangladesh, a delta nation crisscrossed

by hundreds of rivers. Experts blame poor maintenance, lax safety standards at shipyards and overcrowding for many of the accidents.

In June last year, a ferry sank in Dhaka after it was hit from behind by another ferry, killing at least 32 people. In February 2015, at least 78 people died when an overcrowded ship collided with a cargo boat in a central Bangladesh river.

Separately, one protester was killed and at least three others are in critical condition after police in Bangladesh opened fire on a violent protest against coronavirus restrictions, officials said. The incident took place Monday in the central town of Saltha in Faridpur district, where rumors had spread that a man at a market was injured while police were enforcing Covid-19 controls as cases spike nationwide.

Thousands of people took to the streets in anger. One group hurled bricks at a police station, vandalized government offices and torched an officer's home and two government cars, police said.

A police spokesman said officers opened fire "in self-defense" after the station was attacked. A 20-year-old Islamic student was killed and at least seven people injured, including three police, according to Suminur Rahman, Faridpur deputy chief of police. Staff at state-run Faridpur Medical College Hospital said three people with gunshot wounds are in critical condition. "One of them was hit in his buttocks, another in his chest and the third person was shot in



Divers recover a dead body from the capsized boat in Shitalakshya River, in Narayanganj Monday. —AFP

both legs," Abdul Matin, a doctor at the emergency ward, said. Police said supporters of the hardline Hefazat-e-Islam group had joined the attack. Hefazat members were involved in deadly clashes during demonstrations against a visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month.

Bangladesh on Monday instituted a seven-day nationwide lockdown after 7,087 people tested positive for coronavirus on Sunday, the highest daily total recorded in the South Asian nation. All domestic buses, ferries, trains and flights have been suspended, and shops and malls have been shut. A nighttime curfew is also in effect. —AFP

## Migrants, trade key as Spain PM visits Senegal, Angola

**MDRID:** Stopping irregular migration and bolstering trade ties will top the agenda when Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez visits Angola and Senegal this week. With Spain's tourism-driven economy shrinking by nearly 11 percent last year as a result of the pandemic, officials are now looking further afield for opportunities.

Sanchez will begin his tour on April 8 in the south-west nation of Angola, taking with him business leaders

from the engineering, energy and logistics sectors as well as from plane-maker Airbus. He is scheduled to meet President Joao Lourenco before flying north to Senegal, the west African nation helping Spain to block irregular immigration to Spain's Canary Islands.

In 2020, the number of migrants reaching the Atlantic archipelago from the African coast was eight times higher than the previous year. Spain has stepped up diplomatic efforts to stop people from leaving their home countries in the first place, while also seeking to expand controversial repatriation agreements. When he lands in Dakar for the first visit by a Spanish leader in six years, Sanchez will meet President Macky Sall as well as some 60 Spanish police officers deployed there to block irregular migrants.

He will also meet Spanish troops that support

France's Operation Barkhane, which has been battling a jihadist insurgency in Mali. "We want to turn this decade... into the decade of Spain in Africa," Sanchez said late last month as he unveiled a plan to become Africa's "strategic partner". Between January and November last year, Africa accounted for 6.0 percent of Spanish exports and 7.0 percent of its imports. Although modest, the figures were higher than those for Latin America, which stood at 4.3 percent and 4.8 percent respectively. Spain is pinning much of its hope on the renewable energy sector, but it is also looking to build its presence in manufacturing, banking, telecoms and agribusiness. Madrid has been courting the backing of Ghana for its renewed interest in Africa, with Accra housing the secretariat of the AfCFTA, a free trade body covering 54 African countries. —AFP

### News in brief

#### US vows 'much more' vaccine aid

**WASHINGTON:** The United States will soon be able to ramp up vaccine assistance abroad and will not seek "favors in return," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Monday, putting a veteran aid administrator in charge. Blinken said the top US priority was to fight COVID-19 at home but that the goal would be achieved soon, pointing to President Joe Biden's promise that 90 percent of Americans will be near a vaccination site by April 19. "We are exploring options to share more with other countries going forward. We believe that we'll be in a position to do much more on this front," Blinken said. —AFP

#### Top Benin judge flees country

**COTONOU, Benin:** A top Benin judge on Monday said he had quit and fled the West African country, condemning political pressure that he alleged included a demand to detain an opposition figure in the run-up to presidential elections. His denunciation comes as critics accuse President Patrice Talon of cracking down on opponents, including rivals who had sought to contest Sunday's ballot. Essowe Batamoussi said he had stepped down as a justice with the Economic Crime and Terrorism Court (CRET), which oversaw a probe into opposition candidate Reckya Madougou, who was arrested last month. —AFP

#### Survivors turned back by Tanzania

**MAPUTO:** The United Nations raised the alarm on Monday over reports that Tanzania forcibly returned hundreds of Mozambicans fleeing jihadist raids last month. Thousands of people fled into surrounding forest when Islamic State-linked militants launched attacks on the northeastern town of Palma on March 24, ransacking buildings and beheading civilians. Stranded in the bush with little access to food or water, some of the escapees headed south but others walked north to the Tanzanian border. —AFP

#### 8 Venezuela soldiers killed

**CARACAS:** Venezuela said Monday eight of its soldiers have died since an offensive started two weeks ago against armed groups operating on the border with Colombia. Thirty-four have been injured, Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino said in an address broadcast on state television, upping the death toll given over the weekend from six soldiers and nine "terrorists." Venezuela's armed forces have engaged in clashes with Colombian armed groups in the western border state of Apure since March 21, displacing thousands of civilians towards Colombia.

#### Western Sahara demands UN seat

**ALGIERS:** Western Sahara's foreign minister Mohamed Salem Ould Salek on Monday demanded a UN seat for the disputed territory and accused France and Spain of impeding a referendum on self-determination. The status of Western Sahara, which the United Nations classifies as a "non-self-governing territory", has for decades pitted Morocco against the pro-independence Polisario Front. "The Sahrawi state claims its seat at the UN," said Ould Salek, on behalf of the republic declared by the Polisario in 1976. The republic, as a founding member of the African Union, "demands its rightful place" among world nations, he told a news conference in Algiers, allies of the Polisario. —AFP