

Protests, tear gas in Myanmar after UN envoy urges action

06/03/2021 16:46 by admin

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Anti-coup protesters standing behind makeshift-shields brave teargas as others run away in Mandalay, Myanmar, Wednesday, March 3, 2021. (AP Photo)

Yangon: Security forces in Myanmar again used force Saturday to disperse anti-coup protesters, a day after the UN special envoy urged the Security Council to take action to quell junta violence that this week left about 50 peaceful demonstrators dead and scores injured.

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Protests were also reported in Myitkyina, the capital of the northern state of Kachin, Myeik, in the country's far south where police fired tear gas at students, and Dawei in the southeast where tear gas was also used. Other places included Kyaikto, in the eastern state of Mon, Loikaw, the capital of Kayah state in eastern Myanmar, and Myingyan, a city where one protester was killed on Wednesday.

The escalation of violence has put pressure on the world community to act to restrain the junta, which seized power on Feb. 1 by ousting the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in Myanmar, which for five decades had languished under strict military rule that led to international isolation and sanctions.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party led a return to civilian rule with a landslide election victory in 2015, and with an even greater margin of votes last year. It would have taken a second five-year term of office last month, but instead she and President Win Myint and other members of her government were placed in military detention.

Large protests have occurred daily across many cities and towns. Security forces responded with greater use of lethal force and mass arrests. At least 18 protesters were shot and killed last Sunday and 38 on Wednesday, according to the UN Human Rights Office. More than 1,000 have been arrested, the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners said.

UN special envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said in her briefing to Friday's closed Security Council meeting that council unity and "robust" action are critical "in pushing for a stop to the violence and the restoration of Myanmar's democratic institutions."

"We must denounce the actions by the military," she said. "It is critical that this council is resolute and coherent in putting the security forces on notice and standing with the people of Myanmar firmly, in support of the clear November election results." She reiterated an earlier appeal to the international community not to "lend legitimacy or recognition to this regime that has been forcefully imposed and nothing but chaos has since followed."

The Security Council took no immediate action. Council diplomats said Britain circulated a draft presidential statement for consideration, a step below a legally binding resolution.

Any kind of coordinated action at the UN will be difficult because two permanent members of the Security Council, China and Russia, are likely to veto it.

Schraner Burgener earlier this week warned Myanmar's army that the world's nations and the Security Council might take huge, strong measures.

And the answer was, 'We are used to sanctions, and we survived those sanctions in the past,' she said. When she warned that Myanmar would become isolated, Schraner Burgener said 'the answer was, 'We have to learn to walk with only a few friends.' The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies urged immediate protection for all Red Cross volunteers and health workers.

The statement came after video from a surveillance camera that was circulated widely on social media showed members of an ambulance crew in Yangon being savagely beaten after they were taken into custody by police on Wednesday.

'We express profound sadness that Myanmar Red Cross volunteers have been injured while on duty providing lifesaving first aid treatment to wounded people, in line with fundamental principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality. Red Cross volunteers should never be targeted,' the federation said.

- AP