More Bloodshed in Myanmar as Crackdown on Coup Protests Continues

The death toll has passed 700, with more than 80 killed on Friday in one city alone, a rights group said.

University students marching against the military coup in Yangon, Myanmar, on Sunday. Credit...The New York Times

By Richard C. Paddock

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The Myanmar military's bloody crackdown on the nationwide resistance to its rule showed no sign of easing on Sunday, with a human rights group reporting that the death toll across the country had passed 700.

The security forces killed 82 people in a single city on Friday, according to the group, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which has been documenting the bloodshed since the military's Feb. 1 coup. Soldiers used machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades to attack an organized group of protesters who had set up barricades to defend part of that city, Bago.
The military appears to be targeting centers of resistance around the country, using overwhelming power against largely untrained, poorly armed protesters. In Tamu, a town near the border with India, members of a local defense group similar to the one in Bago claimed to have killed some members of the security forces on Saturday after coming under attack.

The security forces’ assault in Bago, about 40 miles northeast of Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city, was one of their most lethal yet. A reputable news outlet, Myanmar Now, also put the death toll in Bago at 82.

On Friday, a spokesman for the junta, Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun, suggested that the military had been exercising restraint since the coup, telling reporters that it could be killing many more people if it wished.

“If we were to actually shoot the protesters with an automatic rifle, the 500 people you are talking about would have died within hours,” he said after being asked about the nationwide toll.
Survivors of the attack have fled the city and are regrouping, Mr. Myo Kyaw said. “We will never give up,” he said. “They must pay for what they did to our city.”

The United Nations office in Myanmar said on Twitter that the violence in Bago “must cease immediately” and urged the military to let medical teams treat the wounded.

Members of the local defense organization in Tamu, which calls itself the Tamu Security Group, said that as in Bago, the security forces had attacked its defenses on Saturday with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

Members of the security forces were killed in the ensuing clashes, according to two members of the defense group.

Their claims could not be independently confirmed. But killing multiple members of the security forces would be a significant development in the violence since the coup, which has been overwhelmingly one-sided.

A small, little-known rebel group called the Kuki National Army, one of many ethnic armed groups that have been fighting Myanmar’s military for years in regional conflicts, said it had helped the Tamu protesters battle the security forces on Saturday, but the extent of its involvement was unclear. Some leaders of the protest movement have called on rebel armies to join forces.
Over the weekend, rights groups accused the military of trying to intimidate protesters with a new tactic: death sentences in a military court. On Friday, state television reported that 23 people had been sentenced to die after a closed trial for killing a soldier on March 26 in Yangon.

The case was handled by a military court because the alleged killing — said to involve a robbery — took place in a district in Yangon that was under martial law. All but two of the defendants are in hiding and were tried in absentia, the state television report said.

It was not clear whether the defendants were protesters. But Phil Robertson, the deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch, called the trial “another example of the junta’s all-out effort to force people off the streets and crush the civil disobedience movement.”

Daw Aye Aye Thwin, whose son, Ko Bo Bo Thu, 27, is one of the two defendants in custody, said he was at home at the time of the killing and had nothing to do with it. She said she had not been able to see him since his arrest and learned of the sentence on Friday, a day after it was handed down.

“Now I feel like my world is gone,” she said. “I just want to appeal to the authorities not to kill my son.”