Myanmar's military is charging families $85 to retrieve bodies of relatives killed in crackdown

By Julia Hollingsworth and Akanksha Sharma, CNN
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(CNN) Myanmar's military is charging families $85 to retrieve the bodies of relatives killed by security forces in a bloody crackdown on Friday, according to activists.

At least 82 people were killed Friday in Bago, 90 kilometers (56 miles) northeast of Yangon, after the city was "raided" by the military's security forces, said advocacy group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

More than 700 people have died since the military overthrew Myanmar's elected government in a February 1 coup, according to AAPP. Since then, junta security forces made up of police, soldiers and elite counter-insurgency troops have embarked on a systematic crackdown against unarmed and peaceful protesters, detaining around 3,000 people and forcing activists into hiding.

Myanmar's military fired on anti-coup protesters in Bago city Friday, using assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and hand grenades, AAPP said.

An eyewitness who lives in Bago city, who cannot be named for security purposes, told CNN Sunday that many residents have fled to nearby villages since Friday's raid. The internet has been cut off in the area since Friday, the eyewitness said, and security forces are searching the neighborhoods.

"I was living on the main road. The security forces come and station often," the eyewitness told CNN, adding that bodies have piled up at the mortuary following the shootings. "Due to the threat, we had to move into the house in the lane nearby,"

The military is now charging families 120,000 Myanmar kyat ($85) to retrieve the bodies of relatives who died Friday, according to a Facebook post from the Bago University Students' Union.

Radio Free Asia's Burmese service matched the reporting from the Bago University Students' Union. CNN has not independently verified the report and has reached out to the military for comment.

A police vehicle is parked at a road in South Okkalapa township to block anti-coup protesters' gathering in Yangon, Myanmar, Friday, April 9, 2021.

Myanmar's military claimed its forces were assailed by protesters in Bago Friday, according to state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar.

"Security forces were attacked by groups of rioters while removing road barriers solidified by the rioters on the streets in Bago yesterday," Global New Light of Myanmar reported, adding: "rioters used handmade guns, fire bottles, arrows, handmade shields and grenades to attack the security forces."

The newspaper said one protester died during Friday's incident. "Evidence of confiscated grenades and ammunition indicates small arms were used," the report added.

Myanmar's military detained a Red Cross volunteer doctor in Bago on April 2, the organization confirmed to CNN Sunday. The volunteer, Nay Myo, who is also the chair for Red Cross in Bago, has not been charged but remains in detention, Red Cross said.

Another volunteer doctor providing free medical aid on the ground, Wai Yan Myo Lwin, was detained on Sunday in Bago, his family confirmed to CNN.

Protesters march during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon on April 11, 2021.

Backlash to violence

The United States Embassy in Myanmar called for an end to the violence on Sunday.

"We mourn the senseless loss of life in Bago and around the country where regime forces have reportedly used weapons of war against civilians," the embassy said in a post on its official Twitter account.

"The regime has the ability to resolve the crisis and needs to start by ending violence and attacks," it added.

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NGO Human Rights Watch published a letter Thursday urging the European Union to "fully implement" sanctions on the military and "urgently adopt additional sanctions."

"The people of Myanmar find themselves once against facing the military's bullets, but they courageously continue their struggle, unrelenting," the letter said. "EU condemnation and efforts to advance accountability and justice for grave, widespread, and systematic abuses by the military junta are welcome and important, yet words and partial steps are not enough."

But the military's commander-in-chief, Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, defended the coup over the weekend, claiming the junta "did not seize power but took measures to strengthen the multiparty democracy system," according to Global New Light of Myanmar.

Military spokesperson Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun previously told CNN the generals are merely "safeguarding" the country while they investigate a "fraudulent" election, and the bloodshed on the streets is the fault of "riotous" protesters.

CNN stringers in Myanmar contributed reporting.