

## International

# Myanmar protesters gather after general strike call

## 1,800 arrested as troops continue brutal crackdown, Death toll 50

**YANGON:** Anti-coup protesters gathered across Myanmar yesterday, answering a trade union call for a general strike following a weekend of night raids and arrests. The country has been in turmoil since a February 1 coup ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from power and triggered mass protests against the new military junta. The police and military have responded with an increasingly brutal crackdown on demonstrators, with more than 50 people killed and nearly 1,800 arrested.

Despite the risk, protesters rallied in parts of the commercial capital Yangon, the second-largest city Mandalay and other towns around the country.

Yesterday's demonstrations followed an appeal by trade unions for mass walkouts to bring the economy to a standstill. "To continue economic and business activities as usual... will only benefit the military as they repress the energy of the Myanmar people," 18 unions said in a statement. "The time to take action in defense of our democracy is now."

Unions are seeking to extend the impact of an ongoing "Civil Disobedience Movement"—a campaign urging civil servants to boycott working under military rule—which has already hit state machinery hard. The impact has been felt at every level of the national infrastructure, with shuttered hospitals, empty ministry offices, and banks unable to operate. The junta has warned that civil servants "will be fired" with immediate effect Monday if they continued to strike.

### Hospital takeovers

After a restless night with security forces deployed to multiple neighborhoods and shots heard in some areas, parts of Yangon woke to a heavy police presence. "Police and soldiers started clearing off Kyuntaw Road in Sanchaung township. They used sound bombs to stop protesters gathering," a resident told AFP.

"They are now using a bulldozer to remove the barriers protesters have made." Reports emerged overnight that security forces had taken over several public hospitals in Yangon.

Physicians for Human Rights said it was appalled by these moves, calling them a violation of international law. "One eyewitness account detailed armed



**YANGON:** Protesters wearing protective gears take part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon yesterday. — AFP

security forces entering and seeking to occupy West Yangon General Hospital by force," the group said, adding it had reliable information that five other Yangon hospitals were being occupied with similar situations elsewhere in Myanmar.

"Even though medical personnel vacated their government posts to initiate the civil disobedience movement, many returned to government hospitals in response to escalating violence against peaceful protesters."

### International pleas

The coup and subsequent crackdown have drawn widespread international condemnation as well as sanctions against key military personnel. Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne announced late on Sunday the country was suspending its defense cooperation program with Myanmar, which included

English language training. Canberra is reviewing its aid program so money is channeled away from government agencies towards not-for-profit organizations. The United Nations Special Envoy on Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener on Friday demanded an end to the "repression" of protesters and urged the Security Council to act.

But diplomats say the Security Council was unlikely to approve any international measures against the junta, with veto-wielding China—historically allied to Myanmar's generals—seen as a major obstacle.

The military, which denies responsibility for loss of life in the protests, has defended seizing power by alleging widespread electoral fraud in November's elections, which Suu Kyi's party had won in a landslide. The Nobel laureate has not been publicly seen since she was detained as the lightning coup was launched in the early hours of February 1. — AFP

## HK leader praises China's plan to install 'patriots'

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong's leader yesterday praised China's plan to ensure only "patriots" remain in politics, denying the move was a purge of the opposition. Chief Executive Carrie Lam ruled out any need to consult the public on the changes, as they were decreed by Beijing.

Legislation to vet all election candidates in Hong Kong is currently being discussed by China's rubber-stamp parliament and is expected to be adopted on Thursday. China has said only those deemed "patriotic" will be allowed to stand. Critics say the radical overhaul of the city's already limited democratic system will demolish what remains of the pro-democracy opposition and ensure only loyalists remain, an argument that Lam rejected yesterday. "The improvements to the electoral system are not designed to favor someone, it is designed to ensure that whoever is administering Hong Kong is patriotic," Lam, a pro-Beijing appointee, told reporters after returning from the gathering in Beijing. "The decision is timely, necessary, lawful and constitutional, and the central authorities' leadership and decision-making power are out of question."

Authoritarian China promised Hong Kong would keep a degree of autonomy and certain freedoms when it reverted from British colonial rule in 1997. The city has a partially elected legislature and China also promised to one day grant residents universal suffrage. Critics had for years complained freedoms were being steadily eroded. Beijing then ramped up the dismantling of the financial hub's democratic pillars in response to huge and sometimes violent democracy rallies that paralyzed the city throughout 2019. Hong Kong was poised to hold direct elections for half the city legislature's seats last summer but delayed the polls for a year, citing the coronavirus.

## Exiled Belarus leader piles pressure on Lukashenko

**GENEVA:** Exiled Belarus opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has no intention of stopping her fight against the government of Alexander Lukashenko, and is appealing to the United Nations to help intensify pressure on the regime, she told AFP Sunday. Belarus was gripped by months of unprecedented anti-government demonstrations that erupted after a disputed presidential election last August which saw



**GENEVA:** Belarus exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya poses in front of the Palais des Nations on the sideline of her visit to the International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights (FIFDH) in Geneva. — AFP



**HONG KONG:** Chief Executive Carrie Lam speaks during a press conference at the government headquarters in Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

Yesterday, Lam hinted a further delay was likely given the sweeping changes Beijing is planning. "We are not able to tell you now whether the September election can proceed as scheduled," she said, adding the priority was to implement whatever changes Beijing decides on first. She said her government would launch an "intensive" drive to explain the changes. But she said there was no need for a "so-called extensive public consultation", arguing the transformation of Hong Kong's political system was "urgent" and was being spearheaded by the central government.

Hong Kong has never been a democracy—something that has fuelled protests and resentment in the territory towards Beijing. But it maintained a measure of choice, allowing a vocal opposition to contest certain local elections and maintain a minority presence.

When Hong Kongers were allowed to vote, they tended to return high counts for candidates advocating greater democracy. In recent years authorities have ramped up the disqualification of politicians either sitting in the city's semi-elected legislature or standing as candidates, based on their political views. Beijing also imposed a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong last year, snuffing out protest and clobbering the pro-democracy opposition.—AFP

Lukashenko claim a sixth term in office. His opponents say the polls were rigged and that political novice Tikhanovskaya, who ran in place of her jailed husband, was the true winner. But Belarusian security forces unleashed a harsh crackdown, detaining demonstrators and pushing opposition leaders into exile.

"We're convinced that at some point this regime is going to fall, because the pressure it's under is coming from inside just as much as from outside," said Tikhanovskaya, who has been living in Lithuania. "At some point, it won't be able to avoid starting negotiations to get out of this enormous crisis."

"The pressure has to be ramped up," she insisted. On Friday, Belarus requested Tikhanovskaya's extradition "to face prosecution for crimes against the governing order, public safety and the state", an appeal immediately rejected by Lithuania.

Asked about whether she felt safe in Europe in light of the extradition attempt, Tikhanovskaya was stoic. "There's a minimum risk but that's not going to stop me in my fight," she told AFP calmly.

Tikhanovskaya is in Geneva to take part in a debate on Belarus organised by the International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights (FIFDH), but is using the opportunity to argue the Belarus opposition's case to UN officials too. Accompanied by an impressive security detail, the 38-year-old mother-of-two was surrounded by dozens of supporters outside the UN headquarters. The UN Human Rights Council is currently in session, and Tikhanovskaya hopes it will adopt a resolution on Belarus. At its previous session in September, it held an urgent debate on Belarus and adopted a resolution calling on the authorities to enter into a dialogue with the opposition. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Burkina Faso ambush kills many

**OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso:** Six people including civilians were killed when a military detachment was ambushed in northern Burkina Faso, security sources said Sunday. The nation, among the world's poorest, is struggling with a jihadist insurgency that has killed more than 1,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands. "A unit from Gaskinde (Soum province) was ambushed on Saturday. One (soldier) sadly lost his life, and another was injured. On our side, there were five other casualties, all volunteers," a security source said. The five civilians were part of Volunteers for the Defence of the Nation (VDP), a network of civilian volunteers who help the army in their uphill battle against the various jihadist groups operating in the country. — AFP

#### 107 migrants rescued off Canary Isles

**MADRID:** Spain's coast guard rescued 107 migrants from boats off the Canary Islands over the weekend as the migrant surge showed no letup on the Atlantic archipelago, a spokesman said Sunday. A total of 56 migrants were plucked from two vessels on Saturday. One boat was found off the island of Tenerife carrying 15 men, while a second was intercepted off Gran Canaria carrying another 41 men, all of them from sub-Saharan Africa. On Sunday, the coast guard rescued another 51 people on a boat found off Gran Canaria, he said. On board were 49 men and two women. — AFP

#### Iran asked to release dual national

**LONDON:** The UK government on Sunday called for the immediate release of a British-Iranian woman after her five-year sentence for sedition ended in Iran, as a new court summons caused further uncertainty about her fate. Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has been under house arrest for months, had her ankle tag removed, giving her more freedom of movement and allowing her to visit relatives in Tehran. But the 42-year-old dual national now faces another court appearance in Iran next Sunday, dashing hopes among her family, friends and supporters of an immediate return home. — AFP

## S Korea, US agree on troop deal

**SEOUL:** South Korea and the United States have reached agreement on Seoul's contribution to the costs of the US troop presence on the peninsula, Seoul said yesterday, as the two allies kicked off annual joint military exercises. The issue had bedeviled the two allies' security alliance under former president Donald Trump, who had a transactional approach to foreign policy and repeatedly accused the South of free-loading. Washington stations 28,500 troops in the country to defend it from the nuclear-armed North, which invaded in 1950. They are a key part of US forces' deployment in Asia, but negotiations over funding had been gridlocked by the former US administration's demands that the South pay billions of dollars more towards their costs. The Trump administration initially insisted on \$5 billion a year—a more than fivefold increase. Under the previous deal, which expired at the end of 2019, Seoul paid Washington about \$920 million annually.

Seoul's foreign ministry said the two sides had reached an agreement "in principle" without specifying the agreed amount. "The government will resolve a gap that has lasted for more than a year through a swift signing of an agreement," it said in a statement.

The new deal must still be approved by the South Korean legislature. US President Joe Biden has vowed to revive frayed US alliances under his predecessor to counter the challenges posed by Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. "America's alliances are a tremendous source of our strength," the US State Department said in a tweet. It also did not state how much the South would pay.

The two sides "will now pursue the final steps needed to conclude the Special Measures Agreement for signature and entry into force that will strengthen our Alliance and our shared defense," it added.

The agreement came as Seoul and Washington kicked off their annual military training yesterday, which has been scaled down from the usual level over COVID-19, with no large-scale physical troop involvement. The nine-day exercise is still likely to infuriate the North, which has long considered such drills rehearsals for invasion. "The upcoming annual training is a computer-simulated command post exercise that is strictly defensive in nature," the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said, adding they went ahead with plans after considering the pandemic. After his first summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Singapore in June 2018, Trump said Washington would suspend the "very provocative" joint military exercises with South Korea. But a second meeting held in Hanoi in February 2019 broke up early with no progress towards Washington's goal of Pyongyang abandoning its nuclear weapons program. North Korea has put itself under strict self-imposed isolation to try to protect itself against the coronavirus pandemic, adding to the pressure on its moribund economy. — AFP



**KOLKATA:** India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during a mass rally ahead of the state legislative assembly elections at the Brigade Parade ground in Kolkata on Sunday. — AFP

## Huge crowd fetes Modi at rally for key W Bengal poll

**KOLKATA:** A crowd of up to 800,000 turned out for a state election rally by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi Sunday, as he sought to unseat one of his fiercest critics in a campaign hit by violence. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been seeking to expand its power at the state level, and is eyeing the eastern state of West Bengal where the larger-than-life Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has ruled for a decade. The state, home to more than 90 million people with some 73 million eligible to vote in the staggered polling that kicks off on March 27, has so far eluded the BJP. "The next 25 years of development are very important for West Bengal. We want it to lead India when it celebrates 100 years of its independence," Modi told the rally at the Brigade Parade Ground in the capital Kolkata, which can hold up to a million people. Supporters held up life-size cardboard cutouts of Modi's image under the blazing sun. Hundreds also watched the rally from the rooftops of high-rise buildings overlooking the site.

"Our (state) government will work to re-establish the public's belief in government systems, police and administration... We are here for change, a change that brings economic prosperity, jobs and development for all sections of the society," Modi added. The BJP and local media estimated that between 500,000 to 800,000 people attended the rally. Banerjee, 66, remains popular but there are growing signs of anti-incumbency among voters, while some allies have switched sides to join the BJP.

West Bengal, like in its previous polls, has been beset by political violence with workers and activists attacked and several killed. Modi's campaign was boosted by veteran Bollywood actor Mithun Chakraborty, who announced at the rally that he had joined the BJP. Teacher Tapas Burman, who travelled from his village 40 kilometers (24.8 miles) from Kolkata to attend the rally, told AFP voters were "ready for change". "We will fight. We will win," he added. The BJP's push to highlight allegations of corruption, nepotism and minority politics against Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress party has seen them become only marginal favorites to hold on to power, political strategist Amitabh Tiwari told AFP. Tiwari said the poll would also be a referendum on a disputed citizenship law introduced by the national government in late December that sparked violent protests including in Kolkata.—AFP