

'Monster from the sky': two years on from coup, Myanmar junta increases airstrikes on civilians

Thursday 2 February 2023, by [Min Ye Kyaw](#), [RATCLIFFE Rebecca](#) (Date first published: 31 January 2023).

People across the country now live under constant threat of attacks from the skies.

It was early evening, and people had gathered at a local pandal in Moe Dar Lay village, in Myanmar's Sagaing Region, to prepare for a Buddhist novice ordination ceremony the following day. Just as they began to cook, fighter jets appeared in the sky. Then the sound of explosions boomed through the air.

"The jets dropped the bombs out of nowhere," said Naing Ko*, who was just a few houses from the pandal when the attack happened on 19 January. He recalled grabbing his wife and son and rushing to see what had happened. His parent's home, a few kilometres away, was engulfed in flames. His mother, 68, was among eight people killed. She died instantly.

Military violence intensifies

Such attacks have become an almost daily occurrence across Myanmar, where the military junta, which seized power in February 2021, is increasingly launching airstrikes across swathes of the country in an attempt to suppress a determined opposition. A report by Myanmar Witness identified 135 "airwar" incidents over the last six months of 2022 - with each most likely representing more than a single airstrike.

"The count of airwar incidents in the report are almost certainly conservative," said Daniel Anlezark, Deputy Head of Investigations, Myanmar Witness. [Regular internet shutdowns](#), the remoteness of some events and the fear of reprisal all hinder the reporting of airstrikes.

The junta, which relies upon Russian and Chinese aircraft, has launched airstrikes in 10 out of 14 of the country's administrative divisions, according to Myanmar Witness. Schools, medical facilities and religious sites have all been struck.

Separate data, collated by the monitoring group Aclad, suggests the military increasingly launched attacks from the skies in 2022. According to its data, which are based on local media reports and other sources, the number of asymmetrical air or drone strikes by the military, meaning attacks launched outside battles, more than tripled, to 312 incidents in 2022. Each incident can include multiple airstrikes.

People are living in a constant state of fear, said Aung Myo Min, human rights minister of the National Unity Government, which was set up to oppose junta rule. "They call them a kind of monster from the sky," he said of the airstrikes. Some call the planes, now an omnipresence, "the deadly dragonfly".

On Wednesday, which will mark [two years since the military ousted the democratically elected government](#) of Aung San Suu Kyi, its expected that the public will find ways to signal opposition to the junta, and its pledge to hold elections this year. In Yangon, where military violence means it is not safe to take to the streets, “silent strikes”, where the public will stay home, are planned. “One voice and one round. Fight the illegal election by proving your silence,” said the slogan of protest artwork shared online.

Since the coup, the military has faced dogged opposition from both peaceful protesters and armed resistance groups, which have received support from some ethnic armed organizations. In September, the Special Advisory Council on Myanmar estimated that the junta had stable control over just [17% of the country](#) - while opposing groups have effective control over more than 52%.

The junta’s ability to launch airstrikes, however, gives it an asymmetrical advantage over its opponents.

Myanmar’s military is hedging its weaponry portfolio between Russia and China and has moved closer to both countries since the coup - voicing support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and backing Beijing’s claims to Taiwan, said Hunter Marston a researcher and analyst at the Australian National University in Canberra. “They have been relying on their air advantage and using it indiscriminately,” he added.

Debris scattered around destroyed wooden structures in Hpakant township, Kachin state, Myanmar in October 2022. Photograph: AP

For Naing Ko, the violence of the airstrike has had a lingering effect on his family and his community.

His father, who was out at the time of the airstrike, was hit by shrapnel and remains in hospital. “We have not told him about my mother in case he gets shocked and something might happen to him,” said Naing Ko. “I cannot lose both of them now.”

The family can barely sleep at night, afraid the military will come again. Naing Ko’s son, 7, is afraid to be away from his parents. “He becomes shaken as soon as he hears the sound of a gunshot or the word “Sitthar” (soldier),” he says.

Scorched earth tactics

The military’s strategy of airstrikes has been deployed in tandem with scorched earth tactics. December 2022, a month that saw an above average number of airstrikes, also accounted for the highest number of intentionally lit fires since monitoring by Myanmar Witness began in September 2021, with more than 132 such incidents recorded.

Sagaing Region, a heartland of the Bamar ethnic majority, and now a hotbed of resistance, has been heavily targeted by both.

Shoon Lei*, who lives in Nyaung Hla village, in the east of Sagaing’s Depayin township, said her area has set alight multiple times. The village was struck by an airstrike last July, only to be burned down six months later on 3 December, and then again on 13 and 25 January.

Map: Myanmar’s military intensifies attacks on opposition heartland - Guardian graphic

“Our village once had 700 houses, but there are now only a hundred left. We cannot count the list of houses that were burned now, but only the list of the remaining houses,” she said.

According to the UN, an estimated 1.5 million people are internally displaced within Myanmar. The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has soared, from 1 million before the coup, to an anticipated 17.6 million in 2023.

Thinzar Shunlei Yi, a prominent anti-coup activist, said the international response since the coup has been “slow and not coordinated”. She welcomed the assistance given to Ukraine, but noted the same help was not offered to Myanmar. “For resistance forces in Myanmar we don’t get any support, even from our neighbouring countries,” she said. “People are blatantly killed in broad daylight just because they can’t defend themselves.”

Shoon Lei believes Sagaing region is being heavily targeted because of the strength of resistance there. In her village, people are now living in shelters made with burnt iron sheets and palm leaves; they fear there is no point in rebuilding, in case their homes are targeted again.

“Everything is temporary in our lives now-clothing, food, shelter. We need to leave these things behind once they enter the village again. Now we put our bedding into bags every morning when we wake up, just to be ready when we have to flee,” said Shoon Lei.

Despite the repeated attacks, she vows to defy the military’s attempts to hold elections. “None of us will participate,” she said. “We will make sure they fail.”

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**Names changed.*

P.S.

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