



MYANMAR'S MILITARY JUNTA CONTINUES AIRSTRIKES AMID EARTHQUAKE RECOVERY

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Myanmar's devastating 7.7 magnitude earthquake on March 28 has thrust the nation into a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale. The quake's impact, catastrophic enough on its own, has been dramatically worsened by the military junta's relentless attacks on civilians, even as the country reels from thousands of fatalities and widespread destruction. With its epicenter in Sagaing and significant impacts felt across Naypyidaw, Mandalay, Magway, Bago, and Shan State, the earthquake has so far claimed over 3,600 lives, with more than 5,000 injured. Predictions by the US Geological Service suggest that the final toll could exceed 10,000 deaths, with economic damage potentially surpassing Myanmar's annual GDP of \$67 billion. Key infrastructure including bridges, roads, hospitals, historical sites, pagodas, and airports has been severely compromised, hindering vital rescue and relief efforts.

The junta's opportunistic response

This natural disaster, the most severe Myanmar has witnessed in over a century, is occurring in the middle of the bloody civil war triggered by the 2021 military coup. Rather than unifying in the face of tragedy, the junta quickly seized the earthquake as an opportunity to shore up its fading international legitimacy. In an unusual move, the regime swiftly appealed for international assistance—a stark departure from its habitual suspicion of external intervention. [Observers warn](#), however, that the regime's sudden openness to

foreign aid appears more strategic than humanitarian, potentially enabling the junta to consolidate control by selectively distributing aid to loyalists and allies.

Simultaneously, the military regime has denied access to international media, citing issues such as difficulties with accommodation, power outages, water shortages, and the preoccupation of regime officials engaged in rescue operations at various administrative levels. This has heightened fears among opposition groups and international agencies of aid misappropriation, recalling how the junta manipulated humanitarian resources after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. The Karen National Union (KNU), a prominent ethnic resistance organization, has explicitly called for stringent monitoring to ensure aid reaches genuine earthquake victims rather than regime loyalists.

Relentless aerial attacks amid tragedy

The junta's duplicity is further revealed by its relentless continuation of military assaults on civilian population even as communities struggle to survive the earthquake's devastation. Within mere hours of the disaster, reports emerged of aerial bombardments in Karen State—near the KNU headquarters—as well as in Shan, Rakhine, Kachin, and Sagaing. Relief organizations, including the Free Burma Rangers, documented these attacks, underscoring the regime's ruthless exploitation of a humanitarian catastrophe to further its military objectives. Even though the junta later publicly declared a 20-day ceasefire starting April 2, they continued airstrikes, artillery shelling, and military offensives during this period.

Beyond these bombings, the military imposed stringent curfews, barring nighttime rescue operations critical to saving lives trapped beneath the rubble. Equally disturbing are credible reports that young men are being forcibly conscripted under the guise of earthquake response operations. Restrictions on local humanitarian groups, which play a crucial role in delivering decentralized aid, have further compounded the misery of those affected by both natural disaster and ongoing violence.

Myanmar's democratic opposition, led by the National Unity Government, responded with restraint and compassion, declaring a two-week ceasefire on offensive military activities and pledging full cooperation with international aid agencies.

Desperate need for international community's assistance

China has dispatched rescue teams and humanitarian supplies to assist in relief efforts. Emergency response teams from countries including India, Russia, Thailand, Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel have also been deployed to aid in search and rescue operations. Additionally, the United States has pledged up to \$9 million in humanitarian aid to support earthquake victims in Myanmar. After three USAID staff members on the ground in Myanmar supporting earthquake recovery efforts were fired amid dismantling USAID, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed America would no longer provide the greatest share of global humanitarian aid and called on other countries to step up. The European Commission has approved initial funding of €13 million (\$14.5 million) for the Myanmar earthquake response. The United Nations has allocated an initial \$5 million from its emergency fund to support life-saving efforts. Concerns remain regarding the effective distribution of aid under the supervision of Myanmar's military junta. International organizations are advocating for the delivery of assistance through non-governmental channels to ensure that aid reaches the affected populations without manipulation.

However, humanitarian support alone will not suffice. Robust international mechanisms must be established to ensure that aid effectively reaches the vulnerable populations rather than propping up a regime widely accused of war crimes and egregious human rights abuses. Rigorous international monitoring and accountability mechanisms must be immediately established to oversee aid distribution, ensuring resources directly reach affected populations and are not misappropriated or politicized by the regime. diplomatic pressure should intensify to compel the junta to cease military operations, especially airstrikes, during the crisis period and relief operations.

Ultimately, Myanmar's civilians are caught in a devastating double bind: a natural catastrophe compounded by ruthless authoritarian violence. Their survival—and Myanmar's path to recovery—depends on decisive international action that unequivocally rejects regime exploitation. By prioritizing humanitarian principles and civilian-led recovery efforts, the global community can provide essential support without legitimizing the regime. Failure to act decisively and collaboratively at this critical juncture risks deepening Myanmar's humanitarian crisis and inadvertently strengthening an oppressive military regime determined to exploit the suffering of its own people for political gain.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.