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Covid-19: Military coup in Myanmar sees virus response crumble as doctors are arrested

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Since the military coup in Myanmar, which began on 1 February, the country's response to covid-19 has been severely damaged.

Nationwide, many healthcare workers went on strike in response to the coup, with organisers of the medical resistance saying that they “refuse to obey any order from the illegitimate military regime who demonstrated they do not have any regard for our poor patients.”¹

The Myanmar military—widely criticised over its attacks on Rohingya Muslims²—have been using increasingly lethal tactics against peaceful protesters and bystanders across the country, Amnesty International has reported.³ It said that officers have been acting recklessly, including indiscriminately spraying live ammunition in urban areas. Reports suggest well over 1000 people have been arrested since the coup began, including at least 85 medical professionals and students.

Writing for *The BMJ*,⁴ Ara Darzi, director of the Institute of Global Health Innovation, Imperial College London, said, “There are reports across the country of doctors being dismissed from their posts, arrested, or going into hiding in fear for their lives. The arrest and detention of medical staff for joining a peaceful protest is an affront to doctors everywhere and a clear breach of humanitarian law. It demands an immediate robust response.”

Meanwhile, the UN has warned of disruption to aid operations in the country, with a spokesperson raising concerns over the severe impact of the coup on covid-19 testing capacity and vaccination planning.⁵

On 8 February it was reported that 1987 tests took place. This was a significant drop from both the 9000 tests carried out a week prior (1 February), and the average of more than 17,000 a day in the week before the coup. The drop in testing has meant that the number of new cases detected on 8 February was just four—at the end of January an average of 420 cases were being identified every day.⁶

Writing in the *Lancet*, a group of doctors and researchers from Myanmar said, “Since the military takeover, the covid-19 response has stalled. Without adequate testing, public compliance and goodwill for isolation, access to acute clinical care, and continued immunisations, the implications for covid-19 spread, morbidity, and mortality are substantial.”⁷

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