

Advance Myanmar

Project report: Saving lives during the military coup 1 February- 30 September 2021

A message in the night

The message came through from Myanmar overnight UK time, on a secure app - the police are closing in on us. One of the members of our group has been arrested. We need money for a safe house and food while we hide.

The message was from a group of activists in a city in Myanmar. For security reasons we can't say which. They had been organising protests against the coup. Now there was no time to waste. If they were arrested, they could be tortured and killed, or spend years in jail in appalling conditions.

We set up Advance Myanmar to be different from most other donors. To be responsive, flexible and fast. These activists were in immediate danger, we had to get money to them at a time when most international transfers were banned, and the military are monitoring transfers closely. But we have the networks and contacts, and within 8 hours the request had been approved and the money was transferred and with them. They used it to escape and stay safe, and after a while began organising protests again.

Introduction

For eight months now, the people of Myanmar have resisted the military coup, but the toll on ordinary people has been enormous. Over 1,000 have been killed, more than 7,000 arrested and hundreds of thousands of people in ethnic states been forced to flee their homes because of Myanmar military attacks. In July a third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic began ripping through the country, with the military stopping people from receiving the medical help they need. Many people who have taken part in protests have fled to the jungle in ethnic states, to hide in areas where the Myanmar military is not in control. At the same time, the military has increased its attacks in ethnic areas, causing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes since the coup started. These people have no shelter, no food and no medicine.

We have worked round the clock to provide support to these people, made possible because of our extensive network of contacts inside Myanmar and on the borders, which we have built up over decades. We have reached hundreds of thousands of people, both with humanitarian assistance and with support to activists and protesters. We can often respond within hours when a request for support reaches us. Working with local activists and civil society organisations, we are able to reach people other organisations cannot, quickly and cost effectively.

One of the activists we have supported wrote to us:

"Firstly, I would like to thank Advance Myanmar for emergency support for Human Rights defenders, especially thinking of feminist perspectives. The support was very useful and decreased my stress (...). I had not brought anything when I left the country and did not get the chance to prepare for leaving."

Another partner who received support told us:

“I would like to thank Advance Myanmar for the support you have given us. You were the first, and the fastest, to support us. At that time, we were primarily helping the people taking part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. The support allowed us to buy food and some medical supplies. Now we need more support to help the Internally Displaced People hiding in the jungle.”

Because of our support to organisations and individuals inside Myanmar, people have avoided arrest, jail and torture, and tens of thousands of people have had food shelter and access to medical care. Even though many of the people we are supporting are in hiding, we have been able to ensure and confirm that all the money we have sent in has reached the intended recipients.



Our Support

1 February-30 September

Since the night of the military coup, Advance Myanmar has worked every day of the week, and many times all through the night, to support activists, Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) strikers, humanitarian responders, human rights defenders, Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and civilians trapped in remote communities. People in desperate need of support have come to us with urgent requests, and we have been able to deliver. Where other donors have taken months to react to the crisis, we reacted immediately, filling gaps and helping people hide, flee and survive when no one else would or could.

The impact of our support has been huge. We have:

- Reached people within hours with life-saving support even though restrictions on international transfers have been in place since 1 February.
- Ensured 50,000 displaced villagers in Karen State have access to rice, preventing starvation.
- Ensured tens of thousands of IDPs in ethnic areas have had access to water, food, shelter and medicine.
- Helped activists hunted by the military junta hide and avoid arrest, potential torture, sexual violence and jail.
- Ensured emergency medical support has reached vulnerable populations in Karenni State, including IDPs.
- Provided aid including food and shelter to very hard to reach populations in Chin and Rakhine State, who have not been reached by any other international donors.

- Made aid delivery possible by funding different modes of transportation, including trucks but also motorcycles, to reach areas that otherwise could not have been reached.
- Protected activists by funding security measures including safe communication consisting of Thai sim cards, satellite phones, mobiles, secure storage and computer security programmes.
- Made sure that reports of the army’s crackdown on civilians have been spread to the world by funding equipment for activists to communicate with the world.
- Paid for clothes and hygiene packs for activists who have had to flee with nothing.
- Helped activists under extreme threats flee to neighbouring countries.
- Kept host communities safe by funding quarantine centres for CDM activists coming into ethnic areas, helping to prevent the potential spread of Covid-19.
- Offered emergency Covid-19 support to people who would otherwise not be able to afford emergency health care, including oxygen.

Our support during these eight months can be roughly divided into three categories:

1. CDM and activist support
2. Humanitarian aid
3. Covid-19 support

The categories are not always clear cut, and sometimes support crosses over two or all three categories. Nevertheless, below we give a bit more detail of the support in these three categories.

CDM and Activist Support

The military’s brutal crackdown on protesters meant that many taking part had to flee to other parts of Myanmar, or cross the border to neighbouring countries. Many also had to go into hiding in the cities they were in. As one of Advance Myanmar’s partners described the situation back in May:

“The junta will issue arrest warrant for anyone who opposes them, especially human right activists, media workers, artists, actors, civil society groups, social media influencers and so on. Many of these arrests happen forcefully at night, and there have been numerous reports of torture and death in detention. People who fit in to these categories are not safe if they continue live in cities. People at risk of arrest, detention, and attacks have to seek safety in rural villages and neighboring countries. Similarly, many teachers, lawyers, students, bank officers and government workers who joined the Civil Disobedience Movement have had to hide or flee to a safe place.”

Advance Myanmar Partner



CDM protest Lashio, Shan State. March 2021.

Since the coup, we have supported both individual activists and organisations who have needed help due to taking part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. In total, we have provided 47 grants for this purpose, helping thousands of activists stay safe and keep opposing the military coup, and tens of thousands taking part in protests all around the country. We know for certain that because of this support, people have avoided arrest and potential torture, have been able to bring their families to safety, and have been able to continue their resistance in exile.

One activist who received support from Advance Myanmar wrote to us:

“Even though, I have relocated to (---) for my security reason, I continued to work at (---), doing advocacy at international, regional, national levels, and participating in current political process as representative of (---).”

The support from Advance Myanmar hasn't just kept activists safe, it has also helped them continue their resistance to the coup.

Because of our support, protesters have been more protected when faced with the brutality of Myanmar soldiers and police during demonstrations. Activists have been ingenious and creative in sourcing protective gear such as gloves and goggles to avoid the worst effect of teargas and protective clothing.

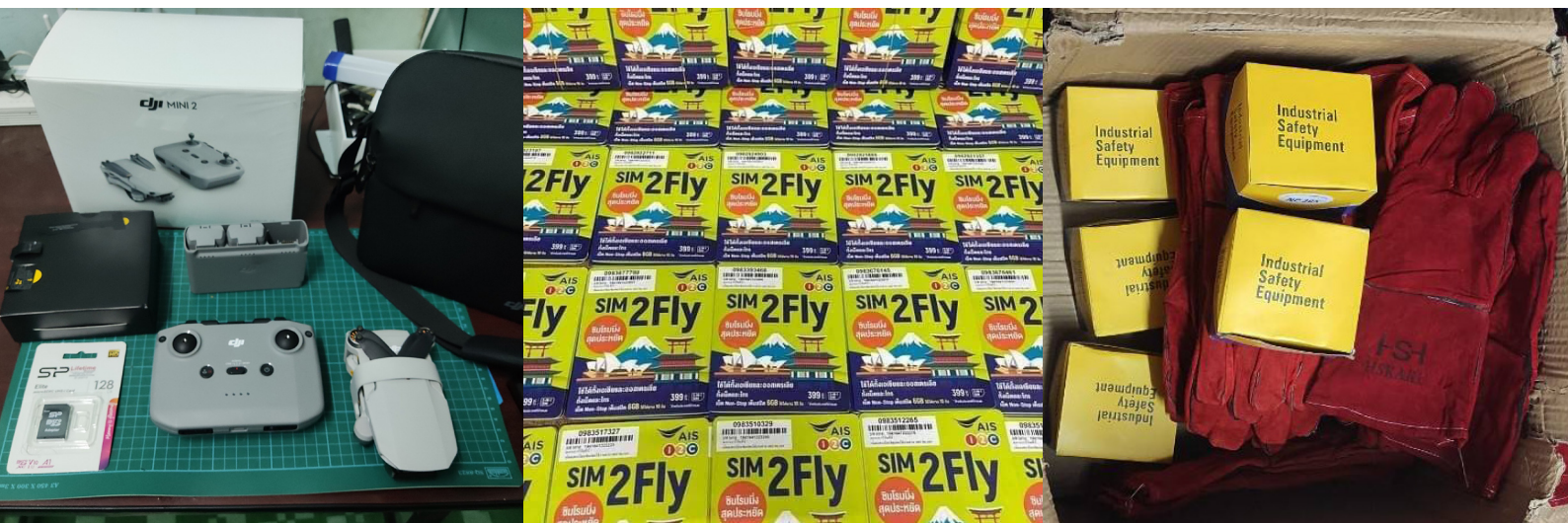
Many times, activists have needed this support urgently, and Advance Myanmar has been able to respond quickly, filling gaps that no other donor would. Activists in Myanmar know they can reach out to us, safely, and we will do everything we can to respond as quickly as possible, always prioritising their safety.

Our funding has helped activists and people taking part in the CDM:

- Stay safe by funding equipment for safer communication and protective gear for protesters.
- Provide information to the United Nations, media and the world of what is going on.
- Escape arrest, reach safe places and safe houses.
- Continue CDM participation by cash support.
- Survive after fleeing with their families.
- Organise protests and rally communities by providing information and education.

“The fund was able to help in raising awareness about Human Rights, Democracy, and National Reconciliation for not only (--) Youths but also among other ethnic nationalities. In addition, it also helps in supporting the security of the youth protesters and leaders.”

Advance Myanmar Partner





Humanitarian Aid

“There are so many IDPs fleeing to the border and we are building bamboo clinics on the border to provide for emergencies.”

Advance Myanmar partner

Already suffering from decades of attacks and oppression by the Myanmar military, people in ethnic states have borne the brunt of the military’s brutality. After the initial brutal crackdown by the police and soldiers on the large-scale protest movement that swept Myanmar after the coup, many CDM strikers and activists fled to Myanmar’s jungles to seek protection in areas not controlled by the military. At the same time, the military increased their attacks on the civilian population in these states, using fighter jets in Karen State for the first time in 20 years, and later escalating attacks in Karenni and Chin State. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee and become internally displaced people, IDPs.

One report from a partner in an ethnic area stated in April:

“The main causes to the displacement are armed skirmishes, BA (Burma Army) troops patrols, BA mortar shelling, air strikes and bombing, planes and drones sentries over the area almost every day. These have threatened the lives of the villagers, where about one-third of the population in the district are now displaced.”

And from another in different ethnic state in June:

“I want people to know that over one hundred thousand people are displaced in this state. That is one third of the population. This is not only a humanitarian crisis. Crimes against humanity is being committed in our state by the military.”

Ethnic civil society organisations have been at the forefront of supporting both CDM activists seeking protection, and IDPs needing the most basic human needs met. A lot of the time, this work has intersected and it is hard to clearly categorise what exactly is CDM support, and what is humanitarian aid. Protesters escaping arrest usually arrive in ethnic areas with nothing, all their possessions left behind as large bags would attract attention at military checkpoints.

Advance Myanmar is grateful that we have been able to support organisations supplying IDPs and activists with basic human necessities: food, water, shelter, electricity. Our humanitarian support has been concentrated to fewer, larger grants to implementing organisations with experience of dealing with humanitarian support who could quickly scale up their work to meet local needs. In total, we have supported eight organisations. It is hard to judge just how many people they have reached, but it is reasonable to say that it is in the hundreds of thousands.

Our ability to act quickly on requests for support has been life-saving. For example, in April an organisation reached out to us, requesting funds to purchase rice for tens of thousands of IDPs before the rains cut off

the supply routes. We responded to this request within days and this made it possible for the organisation to prepare locally for the needs of the communities in the coming months. If we hadn't supported this request, no other donor would have responded in time.

The humanitarian assistance has helped local organisations provide the following to IDPs and villagers:

- Food and drinking water
- Wells, water tanks and water filters
- Cooking equipment
- Medicine, medical equipment and hospital dormitories
- Dormitories for quarantine
- Shelters, bedding and mosquito nets
- Electricity via solar panels
- Hygiene packs

Moreover, this aid has provided:

- Transportation for aid deliveries and travel between camps and communities for community leaders and health workers.
- Communication equipment for activists and people organising the emergency response.

We are so impressed with how much the organisations on the ground are managing to achieve under such difficult circumstances. What the delivery of humanitarian aid has shown post-coup is the importance of cross-border aid, and of local grassroots organisations anchored in their communities. During the political period before the military coup, the international community prioritised aid through central government structures and registered organisations, simultaneously cutting their ties with local grassroots and border-based organisations. But it is these groups, just as it was during the previous military dictatorship, that now are the ones with real access and ability to provide help, as they have never relied on central Myanmar connections and aid delivery routes. They often operate in areas beyond Myanmar military control. It is urgent that the international community and donors again start funding these organisations that make a real difference in peoples' lives.



Combating the Covid-19 Crisis

“We would like to express our gratitude for your valuable contribution. Your support goes to helping us for conquering Covid-19 Pandemic during military coup.”

Partner in Myanmar

The third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded across Myanmar from the beginning of July 2021. The horror of the spread of the virus is made so much worse by the military, who are still pursuing and arresting medics who supported the uprising, rather than letting them save lives. The head of the Covid vaccination programme in Myanmar under the NLD is in Insein Prison in Yangon.

Furthermore, the military is withholding oxygen from the people, sharing it out among the soldiers and their families instead, and doing the same with what little vaccines they have. People who have been forced to break curfew at night to try to purchase oxygen for dying family members have been shot at by soldiers, and sometimes have had their hard gained oxygen confiscated. We know of several people that have died because of the impossibility of acquiring oxygen.

Advance Myanmar is responding to this. Providing support through underground networks of activists and health workers to help them with oxygen, medicines, transport costs, food. We have also provided support to groups working with prevention, such as hand sanitisers and face masks in schools. This support has reached thousands of people.

“Thank you very much for this. All of my family members are sick.”

Activist supported by Advance Myanmar

Our Covid-19 support has helped fund:

- PPE
- Oxygen
- Food
- Transport
- Medicines

Again, Advance Myanmar could respond directly when the urgent need for help combatting Covid-19 rose, channelling support much quicker than other donors, and reaching people who otherwise wouldn't have had access to medical care. Thanks to our support, communities have also been able to keep working on covid prevention strategies.

Financial report

1. CDM and Activist Support	£177,526
2. Humanitarian Aid	£229,409
3. Covid-19 Support	£37,962

TOTAL **£444,897**

At the end of September, Advance Myanmar has provided nearly half a million pounds in support to groups and individuals in Myanmar to deal with the military coup, reaching hundreds of thousands of people.

Geographic spread of support

We have provided support right across Myanmar, from cities like Yangon and Mandalay to some of the remotest parts of ethnic states, including Shan, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Chin and Rakhine State, as well as the Irrawaddy Delta. When the military stepped up attacks in Karen State forcing 50,000 people to flee, we were able to provide emergency grants to ensure stockpiles of rice reached them before the rainy season hit and made transportation impossible. We have helped people who have had to flee the country altogether, sometimes walking days on end with young children and only the things they are able to carry with them.

The strength and resilience of partners and activists

Throughout this time, the people we have been able to support have expressed their sincere gratitude to Advance Myanmar and our donors. We have been able to help them quickly without asking for burdensome reports in order for them to be able to receive funds. They have been able to concentrate their work on what really matters: saving lives, their own and others. We are continuously in awe of our partners and what they are able to achieve during these extremely difficult circumstances.

More support is urgently needed

Eight months in, the military's attacks on the people show no way of slowing down. Rather, they have intensified their warfare throughout the coup, using mass arrests, extra judicial killings and full-scale military attacks to try to suppress people. The humanitarian crisis is growing by the day, with the UN estimating that 3.1 million people are in need of humanitarian support – a number that can potentially double in the next few months.

Activists keep resisting the military rule, as well as delivering humanitarian assistance. Other donors still keep putting onerous terms and conditions on aid, and we are aware of groups having to decline support offered because of the conditions attached. "We wish all donors were like Advance Myanmar", one told us. Another said "Your quick support enabled us to bulk buy rice to support IDPs".



Advance Myanmar

Advance Myanmar has six part-time staff that have worked with the implementation of the project. This includes, but is not limited to, project management, financial transfers, accountancy and audit, fundraising, contact with partners in Myanmar, psychological support, organisational leadership and communication with supporters.



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