

Forced Evictions of Squatters during the Coup in Hlaing Thayar, Yangon

From Squatting to Homelessness

An Initial Report | October 2021

This report aims to give an account of the systematic human rights violations of forced evictions in Yangon during the military coup, focusing on the case of Hlaing Thayar Township. This report has been prepared and documented by local inhabitants who are risking their lives. In order to protect their identity and the providers of the visual material, we haven't included direct credits but have obtained their consent to circulate this information.

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List of Abbreviations

CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
GAD	General Administration Department
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
NLD	National League for Democracy
PDF	People's Defense Force
SAC	State Administration Council (The Military)
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN-SDGs	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
YCDC	Yangon City Development Committee

Section 1: Executive Summary

On 10th October 2021, squatters residing along the Yangon-Pathein Road received a notice from their ward administrators stating that they were to prepare for urgent removal from where they lived for almost a decade. This news came abruptly, leaving many of them no choice or alternative and in great despair. Just a few weeks prior, residents reported seeing professionals come to the squatters' huts under the Bayintnaung Bridge to take measurements and photos. Although some of the squatters who are close to the General Administration Department (GAD) were aware that squatter clearance would occur sooner or later, no one expected that forced evictions on this scale would happen so suddenly and without alternative housing arrangements.

On the morning of 28th October 2021, tens of bulldozers and military trucks accompanied by armed soldiers, policemen and municipal workers came to destroy make-shift huts and houses on the shoulder of the Yangon-Pathein Road, the main highway connecting western Yangon with Pathein in Ayeyarwady Region. In fact, many squatters had already torn down their dwellings the night before out of fear that

they would face arbitrary arrest, beatings and torture when the soldiers came in the morning. An online source confirmed that an estimated 8,000 families are facing this coercive removal of squatter settlements along this road. Hlaing Tharyar houses more than 300,000 squatters, their numbers greatly influenced by the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, which caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and homelessness as well as a mass influx of migrants from affected regions into Hlaing Tharyar's industrial zones.

Following the 1st February 2021 military coup, hundreds of migrant workers and squatters participated in the street protests against the military takeover. Some were among those present at the first rally gathered at Hledan Junction near Yangon University. On 14th March, the military cracked down on strike camps along the Yangon-Nyaungdon Road killing more than 76 unarmed protesters. Some squatters sacrificed their lives for the cause of democracy and justice while others faced arbitrary detention, torture, and arrest warrants.

In the beginning of the National League for Democracy (NLD) period in 2016, the government launched plans for squatter resettlement along with low-cost housing provision and issuance of Smart Cards (Squatter Identity Cards) to squatters in Yangon Region with assistance from UN-Habitat and other INGOs. However, the NLD's policy remained just that—plans—and was largely unable to address the fact that adequate housing remains inaccessible for Yangon's urban poor. Thus, hundreds of thousands remain squatting in self-constructed makeshift housing in Yangon's periphery. Notably, Myanmar was one of the first signatories to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and supported the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030, of which Goal No.11 states "By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums."

This report calls attention to what is happening in the largest squatter community in Yangon at present. It highlights the current conditions and inaccessibility of adequate housing for squatters who are suffering from a range of

human rights violations during the two big C's: Covid-19 and the Coup.

1.1. Methodology

Data for this report was collected in October 2021, relying on news media, social media reports, communiques from the State Administration Council (SAC) and interviews with key informants living in Hlaing Tharyar. The report focuses particularly on the squatters forcibly evicted in October 2021. This report interprets the current squatter removal and explores the possible reasons behind its emergence, with narratives as to their participation in protest against the coup. In addition, it also attempts to link this punitive event to a continual denial of the right to adequate housing and the right to life.

For the sake of security due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, interview data are anonymized. Oral consent was obtained by phone prior to telephone interviews conducted in Burmese.

Section 2: Township Profile

Hlaing Tharyar officially came into being on 13th July 1989. Previously, fire victims from Sein Pan Myaing ward, Mayangone Township were relocated to the place planned for installation of Hlaing Tharyar in 1985. Other fire victims joined them throughout the late 1980s. In 1989, thousands of households (who were thought to be squatters) were forcibly moved to the area according to the 1986 resettlement plan in the then Rangoon. Later, 5 village tracts from Insein and 6 from Htantabin were plotted and added to urban planning of Hlaing Tharyar. Then only did Hlaing Tharyar come into existence by the Order No.2/306/Atha 2 issued by the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs on 13th July 1989.

Hlaing Tharyar is located in the western part of Yangon, one of the biggest townships, also the most populated township in the country. It comprises 20 wards and nine village tracts and shares borders with Htantabin Township in the north and west, Insein Township, Mayangone Township and Hlaing Township in the east (across the Yangon River), and Twantay Township in the south. In the late 1980s, the township

became an industrial zone, and since 1993, it has been developed into a residential area as part of city expansion, mainly for housing squatters, who were resettled from the inner city by the military government. Today, Hlaing Tharyar has the highest number of informal settlements, in total 181, with approximately 24,865 households and an estimated population size of 124,325.¹

The township has expanded rapidly since 2008. Especially after Cyclone Nargis hit the Ayeyarwady Delta in 2008, the township experienced a sharp increase in population due to an influx of internally displaced persons. On top of that, the political and economic opening in 2012 increased migration, especially of rural dwellers from the Ayeyarwady Delta.² Most are economic and environmental migrants, fleeing from a combination of environmental disasters like Cyclone Nargis or soil erosion, and economic hardship brought about by stagnating rural wages, landlessness and seasonal unemployment. Unaccompanied

1 YIS-RP, 2019.

2 Kostner et al. 2018, p. xii.



Fig. 1 Hlaing Tharyar Township (adapted from Google Earth © 2021 Maxar Technologies)



Fig 2. The indicated area is where squatters are removed (adapted from Google Earth © 2021 Maxar Technologies)

by availability of formal housing and formal allocation of land by the government, this rapid migration resulted in several changes to land use and housing practices, from informal expansion of the township into unoccupied land on its fringes; squatting on public lands; as well as to the opening of hostels by other residents on formal as well as informally occupied land.

Exactly one year preceding the coup, on 1st February 2020, Hlaing Tharyar was divided into two townships: East Hlaing Tharyar and West Hlaing Tharyar by Pyidaungsu Hluttaw

(Myanmar's national parliament) article 58 recorded in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw regular session. In accordance with the directive sent by the Yangon Region Government, the GAD made a population survey again and found that the township's residents reached more than 1 million (local population 750,000 plus nearly 400,000 migrant workers and squatters). In fact, Hlaing Tharyar has a population of 687,867 according to the 2014 census, but the census does not include unregistered households.³

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Hein Thar, 2019.



Fig. 3 The protest in Yangon on 6th February 2021



Fig. 4 Protesters take part in a demonstration against the Myanmar military coup in Yangon in February 2021

Section 3: The Coup and Squatters

A few days after the coup, migrant workers, and squatters from Hlaing Tharyar took to the street voicing their calls for a return of democracy and an end to the coup. Especially migrant workers-cum-squatters participated in the first rally in Yangon on 5th February led by activists from the Factory Workers' Union.⁴

On 14th March 2021, the heavily armed SAC forces stormed Hlaing Tharyar and cracked down on the strike camps stationed along the Yangon-Nyaungdon Road showering fire on the unarmed protesters, causing more than 54 deaths and fatally wounding dozens.⁵ However, a local humanitarian worker confirmed in an interview that the death toll increased to 78 later that day whilst protesters and locals believed that as many as 100 people were shot dead on that day alone and many dozens were believed to be fatally wounded.

Squatters and migrant workers sacrificed their lives in their fight for the release of detained leaders and return of democracy in Hlaing Tharyar. This has been confirmed

by interviews with local activists supporting the families of those killed. The interviewees added that the majority of the deceased were squatters.

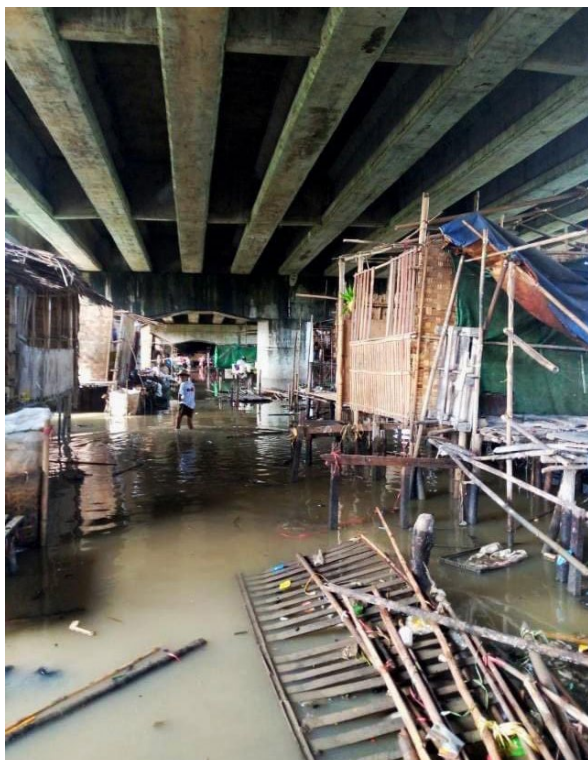
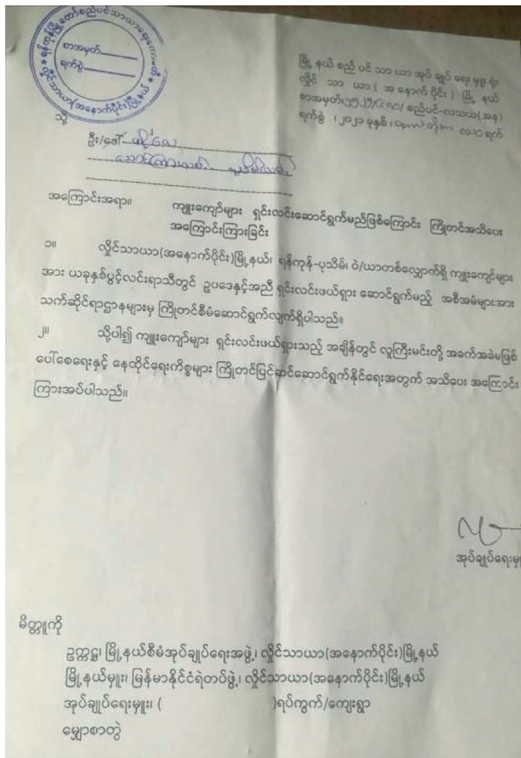
Squatters and migrant workers sacrificed their lives in their fight for the release of detained leaders and return of democracy in Hlaing Tharyar

8 months after the coup, the squatters were faced with a major threat to their right to adequate housing again since the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) issued a notice to all the squatters urging them to prepare for imminent removal. According to squatters living in the area, the SAC has told them via a posted announcement to clear the area by October 23rd under Section 133 in order to “prevent danger arising to the public.”⁶

⁴ VOA, 2021.

⁵ Frontier, 2021.

⁶ Sec. 133 of the Code of Criminal Procedure deals with public nuisance and allows the local officials to remove or tear down structures on public (state) land that may be at risk of falling and causing harm to residents or people passing by.



(From top left) Fig. 5 The notice of removal; Fig. 6-8 Squatter huts under demolition

“The first notice said that squatter huts must be removed in the open season. We think that the open season is March and April when we will save a little money. Later, the second notice arrived after five days. A second notice said that the squatters must be transferred on October 22nd. So, we have troubles. We have no saving money in our hand. They ordered us to transfer urgently. Some had transferred because they were afraid of authorities. We have no place to transfer. That’s why we continue to stay here. Before demolishing, volunteer groups donated rice and meals to us. We are asking the volunteers to share the rice and meals. Some huts can’t afford to cook the rice. This year, the squatter huts faced flooding. We lived at the squatter area over six years. Some squatters are fishermen, and some had earned a living as picking of the plastic bottles and baskets,” said a female squatter.

the saddened scene of destruction was circulating on social media with a variety of photos. In one day, an estimated 8,000 households were made homeless with no refuge to seek and not a penny left to spend on rent.

This led to residents self-demolishing their own housing as they feared arbitrary arrest and torture when the SAC soldiers arrived in the following morning. During the night and the whole day on 28th October,



Fig. 9 View from a settlement before the forced eviction



Fig. 10 Huts from the same settlement under demolition after the eviction notice

Section 4: Possible Reasons behind the Coercive Removal

Although the GAD and the YCDC under the SAC announced that they would clear the squatters from the area for the purpose of public health and security, interviews with two 10-household administrators recalled two recent bomb blasts in the area causing one death and one fatally wounded followed by several night-time raids and arbitrary arrests in these squatter communities. All those arrested were charged with treason under Section 124 of the Penal Code, the Unlawful Association Act (17(1)) and Sec. 511 of the penal code for attempting to commit offenses. In addition, a former gangster from the area also confirmed that the SAC wanted to clear the squatters as they think that local People's Defence Forces (PDFs)

A local interviewee shared their perceptions that the SAC is carrying out this forced removal at this time because they intend to build up trust with local businessmen

have been using the areas as their hide-outs. The punitive nature of the forced evictions should be considered as more than a dozen counter-attacks with bomb blasts on the SAC forces occurred in Hlaing Tharyar within 4 months i.e., from May to October, following a brutal massacre on 14th March and a series of arbitrary arrests accompanied by night-raids and gun-shots.

On the other hand, a former SAC informant said in a telephone interview that he has seen lines of make-shift walls are being erected on the roadside where the squatters' houses have been cleared and a local company owned by a crony would come to invest in the area with a construction project of shophouses. As the Yangon-Pathein highway is the key artery from Yangon to the Ayeyarwady Region and from Pathein town onwards to the popular beach resorts of Ngwe Saung and Chaungtha, it is a highly trafficked route. Although this still needs more confirmation, truly it is a much-talked topic amongst the squatters. A local interviewee shared their perceptions that the SAC is carrying out this forced removal at this time because they intend to build up trust with local

businessmen (including factory owners and developers) to win their favor, as squatter settlements often block the fronts of their factories and supermarkets (especially those on each side of the road). Evicting squatters not only helps businessmen but at the same time incites suspicion and conflict between the squatters and the locals. This happens because locals might think that the squatters, since they have nowhere to go, would come into their wards and villages to squat indefinitely.

There are multiple reasons why SAC may have chosen this time and place to resort to forced evictions: they may want to clear the possible hide-outs of anti-regime forces; win favor and build up trust with local businessmen as foreign direct investment continues to leave the country; and create suspicion-based conflict between the squatters and the locals, making it easier for the SAC to divide and rule. However, the coup has united the two conflicting communities of squatters and local residents into almost a single close-knit community through participation in protests, resistance to coup leaders' policies, and later provision of humanitarian

aid. For the SAC, the forced evictions could be seen as a strategic move to mobilize their supporters, oppress those in defiance, and alienate squatters from aid and support in local communities who are now afraid squatters will set up in their wards, thereby making it possible for SAC to take the entire area under their control.

Section 5: Where to move?

Apparently, over 8,000 families have nowhere to go, or to seek refuge. Some wanted to return to their native villages, but they have nothing to spend on travel and even if they can afford it, they would find it hard to look after their family as they have no jobs in their native villages. Some of them have already moved into the town as they could afford the hostel rent. Still, with unemployment due to Covid and the coup, even those hostel-dwellers may face

to the adjoining towns like Twantay and Maubin where they may squat until they are forcibly evicted again. As the SAC's goal is to remove the squatters from the Patheingyi Yangon road, they are not concerned if these squatters end up squatting in a different place. Some of the squatters have plans to move into wards and villages in Hlaing Tharyar and stay on the sides of the streets as squatters.

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numerous difficulties soon. Almost all the squatters are daily wage earners who live hand to mouth. Therefore, they have no savings at all for a new shelter. A GAD staff member said that some of them may move

Section 6: Abuse of Human Rights

This coercive removal is a blatant violation of human rights. Although Myanmar was one of the first signatories to the UDHR after independence, the state party has long been struggling to fulfill the squatters' accessibility to the rights contained in the document, especially regarding the rights to freedom of movement, arbitrary deprivation of property, and the right to adequate housing. Despite marked progress with low-cost housing and smart-card issuance and documentation of squatters in Yangon Region during the NLD period along with the help from international organizations and partners, the squatter resettlement plan has stagnated with many problems left to address. When it comes to squatter resettlement, even in times of peace, depending on the sensitivity of the

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issue in hand, it requires a multi-layered coping mechanism embedded with a mixed approach tailor-made to maximize the positive outcome of the resettlement plan. Now, with SAC's reckless clearance of squatters in Hlaing Tharyar it is clear that the coup leaders will not abide by any of their human rights obligations.

The article 11.1 of the ICESCR clearly defines that The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing, and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international cooperation based on free consent. Myanmar ratified the ICESCR in 2017. Still, the state has had many challenges and issues to address. In fact, the Myanmar government has been striving towards the realization of the UN-SDGs, especially Goal No.11 (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable) with a strategic urban development plan

of Greater Yangon in close collaboration between the Japan International Cooperation Agency and YCDC.⁷

Now, all progress towards realizing the right to adequate housing for the urban poor has been forcibly put to a stop and squatters' lives are at risk after losing their homes and properties. Absence of rule of law, lack of systematic procedures of resettlement, no plan for alternative accommodation, or plans for compensation present a challenging situation for any intermediary, local or international, willing to provide humanitarian assistance. In the meantime, the empty and deserted areas where the squatters' houses existed mere days ago are well-guarded day and night by the armed forces.

⁷ Nippon Koei Co., Ltd. NJS Consultants Co., Ltd. YACHIYO Engineering Co., Ltd. International Development Center of Japan Inc. Asia Air Survey Co., Ltd. ALMEC Corporation, 2014.

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