

Prayers needed for Myanmar, says Yangon's auxiliary bishop

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – After a military coup and the detention of top government leaders in Myanmar, the auxiliary bishop of Yangon, the nation's largest city and former capital, called for prayers, caution and stocking up on provisions for the people.

“We must live in a spirit of vigilance and prayer,” Auxiliary Bishop John Saw Yaw Han of Yangon told Fides, the news agency of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Concerned that the situation could become critical, Bishop Saw Yaw Han also called on the Church to “provide food reserves to avoid shortages” and “also take care of stocks of medicines to ensure the health of the people,” Fides reported Feb. 1.

The military in Myanmar staged a coup Feb. 1 and detained top political leaders, including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, according to the Associated Press.

The military declared a state of emergency and said Gen. Min Aung Hlaing would be in charge of the country for one year because the government had not acted on the military's claims of fraud in November's elections and because it allowed for an election despite the COVID-19 pandemic, reported AP. Suu Kyi's ruling party had won a majority of the available parliamentary seats in that election.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said in a statement, “All leaders must act in the greater interest of Myanmar's democratic reform, engaging in meaningful dialogue, refraining from violence and fully respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo of Yangon was visiting the northern state of Kachin for pastoral reasons during the coup and could not be reached by Fides.

Bishop Saw Yaw Han instead launched an appeal to all Catholics to pray for peace.

Priests should be particularly vigilant, he said, "and control the people who enter the church complex" for security reasons.

He asked that priests and religious not issue "individual statements" about the current situation, "in order to maintain the unity and coherence of communication" and avoid any "uncertainty and confusion."

Priests were invited "to oversee liturgical services and encourage all believers to pray intensely for peace in Myanmar."

Joseph Kung Za Hmung, director of the Gloria News Journal, based in Yangon, told Fides Feb. 1 that "there is no protest or gathering on the streets of Yangon. Telephone lines are isolated throughout the country, and they only work in Yangon and the capital, Naypyitaw."

"We do however see a strong reaction from people on social media networks," he added.

Starting at 4 a.m. Feb. 1, armored vehicles began patrolling the center of Yangon and Naypyitaw, where the inauguration of the new postelection parliament was to have taken place Feb. 2.

Hmung said, "For the time being, citizens are waiting, as it is feared that a mass protest could lead to a definitive coup that would see the generals in power for decades, ending the experience of democracy."

Military rule in Myanmar lasted from 1962 to 2011 before resuming again with the latest coup.