

Violence against protestors: Case Study

Bago, April 9 2021

Executive Summary

This report uses data collected and verified by Myanmar Witness to provide a detailed description of violence against protestors in Bago city on 9 April 2021, which reportedly resulted in the death of at least 82 people at the hands of Myanmar security forces. Bago city, capital of the Bago Region of Myanmar, had been the site of multiple, unarmed protests, as part of the mass pro-democracy protest movement that followed the military coup of February 2021 in Myanmar. The report identifies evidence indicating that this was a planned operation by security forces, as demonstrated by the positioning of the security forces and the imposition of a communication shutdown.

In particular, we have documented and verified:

- The timing, location and nature of protests in the run-up to April 9, and the positioning of Myanmar security forces in relation to the location of protestors, indicating an intention by security forces to target demonstrations planned by the Bago University Students' Union for April 9 2021.
- The location of barricades and the movement of security forces and protestors on April 9
- The use of lethal and heavy weaponry, usually associated with military use in large-scale conflict against armoured targets, against protestors in main streets near homes and local businesses.
- The imposition of an internet blackout from 01.00 to 09.00 on April 9 2021, indicating the Myanmar security forces may have deliberately attempted to suppress reporting of the crackdown.
- The extent to which some protestors were armed, and with what kinds of weapons.

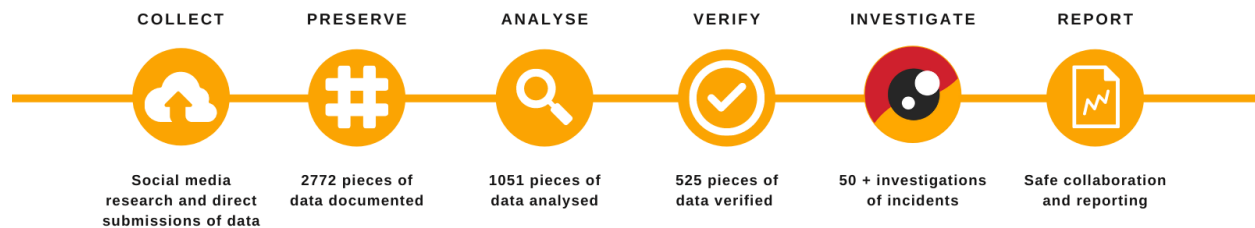
The events of April 9 in Bago are illustrative of SAC tactics that have been used elsewhere in Myanmar since the February 1 coup. The employment of these tactics in Bago, Hlaing Thayar and North Okkalapa (detailed in further reports from Myanmar Witness) indicates a pattern of the SAC using force to intimidate and silence demonstrators in Myanmar.

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Notes on Methodology

Myanmar Witness ensures all information collected is preserved, verified, analysed, investigated and reported on in a manner consistent with best practices for human rights evidence safekeeping, and reliance for later judicial use. The diagram below illustrates this methodology and sets out the volume of data processed for this report.



Myanmar Witness applies a four-tier classification system to describe the extent to which footage has been independently verified by Myanmar Witness. This is as follows:

- **Fully verified:** Footage independently geolocated and chronolocated by Myanmar Witness.
- **Verified:** Footage has been geolocated by Myanmar Witness. Other sources concur on the time and date of the footage, with no evidence following to suggest that the footage was taken earlier or later. However, it has not been possible for Myanmar Witness to independently chrono-locate the footage.
- **Unverified / Under investigation:** Myanmar Witness has not been able to geolocate or chronolocate footage at the present time.
- **Inauthentic:** The geolocation and chronolocation process has shown the location or timing of the footage to be inaccurate.

For the avoidance of doubt, this verification system only refers to Myanmar Witness' ability to independently geolocate or chronolocate footage. Incidents marked as unverified may still be substantiated by multiple eyewitness reports. Sources are cross-referenced in this report to indicate where this is the case. Full details of our verification process can be found in our Summary of Methodology.

This report contains a number of images showing how footage has been geolocated. In these images, white lines are used to represent the left and right arcs of vision. Coloured boxes are used to show how landmarks or distinguishing details in each piece of footage or data correspond with each other.

[Warning: Graphic] has been inserted ahead of links to sources which show graphic and distressing images of injured or dead persons.

Background

Media coverage and reporting of casualties

The events of April 9 2021 in Bago City were covered briefly by Myanmar’s state-run news outlet MRTV, which claimed that two security force officers were injured and one ‘rioter’ was dead, along with two others injured.

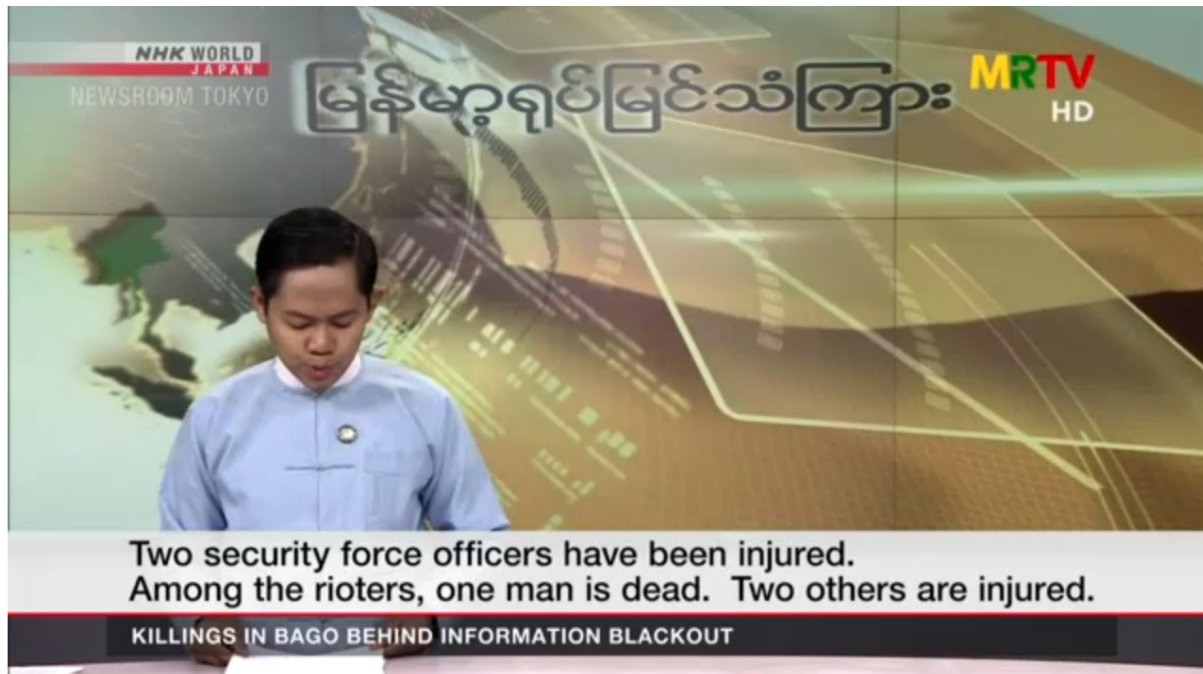


Image 1: Myanmar’s state-run MRTV covering Bago April 9 incident, with translation provided by NHK News.

The Burmese human rights organisation the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#) (AAPP) said “as many as 82 people have been confirmed dead in the shootings”, a figure which has been echoed by [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#). AAPP also stated: “Some were injured and requesting medical treatment, but the military terrorists did not allow any help. Some were therefore killed from excessive bleeding. Dead and injured bodies piled up together. People in urban areas are now fleeing to nearby villages. Today so-called police and military terrorists searched and shot into homes in places.”

The military crackdown on protests in Bago has been the subject of multiple international media investigations such as [Washington Post](#), [NHK News](#), [CNN](#), [BBC](#). Myanmar Witness has assisted international media to analyse footage, images and claims in order to piece together what happened on the ground on April 9, the lead-up to the event, and the aftermath.

Partially using data analysed and verified by Myanmar Witness, the Washington Post and NHK News created visualisations showing precisely where security forces were, and the location of protestors, at varying times of the day. Screenshots of those visualisations can be seen below.



Image 2: Screenshot from the NHK News documentary made in collaboration with Myanmar Witness.



Image 3: Screenshots from the Washington Post investigation for which Myanmar Witness provided supporting data.

Internet shutdowns in Bago

Internet activity between February and May in Bago City was repeatedly shut down, with the majority of blackouts occurring between February 9 2021 and May 14 2021 consistently between 1am and 9am.

Monitoring by the [Monash IP Observatory](#) identified the exact time that the internet was shut off in Bago City on April 9 - starting at 01.00 and lasting to 09.00. Witness statements provided to the [media](#) claimed that SAC commenced their raids at close to 04.00. They also claimed that mobile reception was also lost in the morning of April 9, indicating there may have been a complete blackout of communications. This reporting coincides with the numerous claims on social media that almost all internet was cut in Bago on April 9 from 01.00 to 09.00.

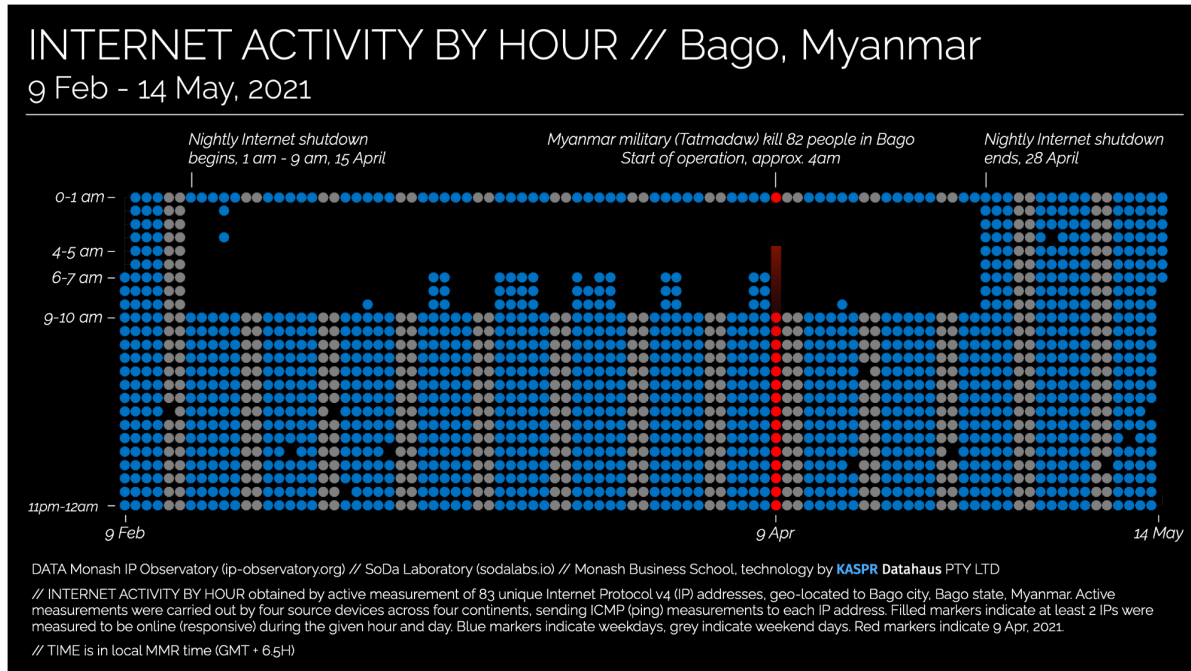


Image 4: Internet activity in Bago recorded by [Monash IP Observatory](#)

Use of force in the lead-up to April 9 2021

April 9 is not the first time demonstrators clashed with security forces in Bago since the February 1 2021 coup. Myanmar Witness has documented a number of what appear to be peaceful demonstrations that were met with varying levels of force by Myanmar security forces in Bago. This section of the report draws on data collected and verified by Myanmar Witness to provide a timeline and description of events that have been identified as significant due to either the level of violence or demonstration size. There were smaller-scale demonstrations and other smaller clashes with security forces which for reasons of space are not included in this report.

The events leading up to the April 9 attack took place in the locations as seen in the map below.



Image 5: Map illustrating location of attacks prior to April 9.

February 9

Large demonstrations were met with riot police in central Bago. Myanmar Witness analysed numerous angles of footage of the same protest from local media and reposted on social media, including the use police water cannons against demonstrators (Image 6). The images were geolocated by Myanmar Witness using the features seen in the background such as the shop names and can be seen on [Google Maps](#) here at these coordinates: 17°20'12.1"N 96°29'22.4"E on Pagoda Road.



Image 6: Image from local media showing water cannons used by SAC to counter demonstrations in Bago on February 9.

March 4

Large protests ensued along Bago's Pagoda Road in the same location as the February 9 demonstrations, filmed by the Bago Times News [here](#) and geolocated to [here](#). This demonstration body was a mix of male and female demonstrators wearing protective clothing such as helmets, shields and goggles, and demonstrators on motorcycles (Image 7 and 8).



Image 7: A still from the footage of demonstrations on March 4 in Bago. Demonstrators wore protective gear such as shields and helmets as well as goggles and masks in anticipation of anti-protest gas.



Image 8: A still from the footage of demonstrations on March 4 in Bago. Demonstrators were also seen on motorcycles.

March 12

Multiple images were posted during protests on March 12 as security forces, allegedly using tear gas, pushed towards a barricade set up by demonstrators. Images from [2021 Revolution Tweets](#) and footage from [Bago Times News](#), verified by Myanmar Witness show smoke around protesters and a large body of riot police pushing toward them. All of the images were geolocated by Myanmar Witness to [this location](#) of MagaDit Road, south of where previous demonstrations were held.



Image 9: A still from footage of demonstrations on March 12 in Bago. Demonstrators face off with police.



Image 10: A still from footage of demonstrations on March 12 in Bago. Demonstrators face off with police.

March 26

The protests on March 26 saw an increase in activity in Bago's suburban area, specifically around the SanDawTwin Road and areas around this location on [Google Maps](#). Social media posts uploaded by local media groups [Myanmar For You](#) and [Bago Times News](#) showed alternative angles of the events that happened on San Daw Twin Road [here](#). Both of the videos were geolocated and verified by Myanmar Witness as being filmed in that exact location.

The video from [Myanmar For You](#) was posted with a quote from a resident in Bago who said "They came in four military vehicles. Now the people have dropped off and the cars have left". The post also stated that 'more than 150 policemen and soldiers from the coup force clashed with local people on Bago Sandaw Dwin Road'.

Both videos appear to show a large barricade set up by the protestors, with a large fire burning near the barricade.



Images 11 and 12: Stills from footage uploaded by [Myanmar For You](#) and [Bago Times News](#) showing the protestors in front of the barricade (in the background). The fire can also be seen burning in the background on the image on the right.

The footage above was matched to this scene on [Google Street view](#) of San Daw Twin Rd, using features seen in the alternative videos such as the shape of the buildings, the lights and the powerlines, and matched to those seen in the Google Street view.



Image 13: Geolocation of stills from footage uploaded by [Myanmar For You](#) and [Bago Times News](#) showing the protestors in front of the barricade (in the background) to San Daw Twin Rd.

March 29

Demonstrations continued in Bago on March 29. Footage uploaded on Facebook by [Bago Times News](#) showed a large group of apparently unarmed protestors with the media outlet's post claiming that they were marching in Bago 'to overthrow the dictator'. This footage was geolocated to [here](#) on MagaDit Road.



Image 14: Still from footage by [Bago Times News](#) showing protest movement in Bago on MagaDit Road.

April 1 - April 8

Myanmar Witness geolocated images from demonstrations - largely from the [Bago University Students Union](#) - posted every day from April 1 to April 8, just before the April 9 crackdown. The images of these protests were geolocated to areas on either [San Daw Twin Road](#), or [MagaDit Road](#). It is important to note the routine of the students' demonstrations primarily focusing on these roads over the consecutive days (see image 15 below), as these were the same roads that were attacked during the April 9 crackdown. This would indicate an intention to target the demonstrations planned by the students' union for April 9.

The images from the university accounts of the demonstrations between April 1 and April 8 appear to be peaceful in nature, and there do not appear to be indications of armed demonstrators present in the images. Many of the demonstrators appear to be carrying placards calling for "help us". Both men and women can be seen in the footage.



Images 15 and 16: Demonstrations from April 1 - images were posted by the [Bago University Students Union](#) Account.



Images 17 and 18: Demonstrations from April 8 - images were posted by the [Bago University Students Union Account](#).

Other events in the run-up to April 9

Other events reported in the run-up to April 9, but not verified by Myanmar Witness include:

- on February 28 [an emergency services charity](#) claimed two 18-year-olds were killed and many injured during crackdowns on protestors;
- on March 14 another 'young man' was shot and killed in Bago and several others injured during protests on that day ([Al Jazeera](#));
- on March 28 a funeral service for a 20-year-old in Bago was attacked by SAC forces but no reports of casualties ([Reuters](#)); and
- On April 7 two men were killed and three people injured in what was claimed to be an unprovoked shooting by SAC forces ([AAPP](#)).

Events of April 9 2021

April 9 - Events immediately leading up to the attacks

In a [Washington Post article](#), supported by Myanmar Witness, witnesses provided details of an early warning, spread among locals in Bago on the evening of April 8, that a military operation was imminent. Some claimed it was a rumour and still attended barricades and demonstration locations on the evening of April 8.

Given the internet blackout commencing at 01.00, and claims of phone outages, it appears there would have been no means of communication for demonstrators to contact or share

information about the attack that morning - indicating that there may have been considerable confusion among the protestors.

It is clear from mapping the presence of previous protests and demonstrations, as well as the known locations of protestor-made barricades, and specifically the locations of the most recent student protests in April, just before the April 9 attack, that the SAC soldiers were deployed and coordinated to attack locations where prior demonstrations were concentrated, especially the demonstrations of the students' union. The deployment locations, or known locations where SAC forces came from, were identified by witness testimony obtained through a collaboration with NHK News and Myanmar Witness.

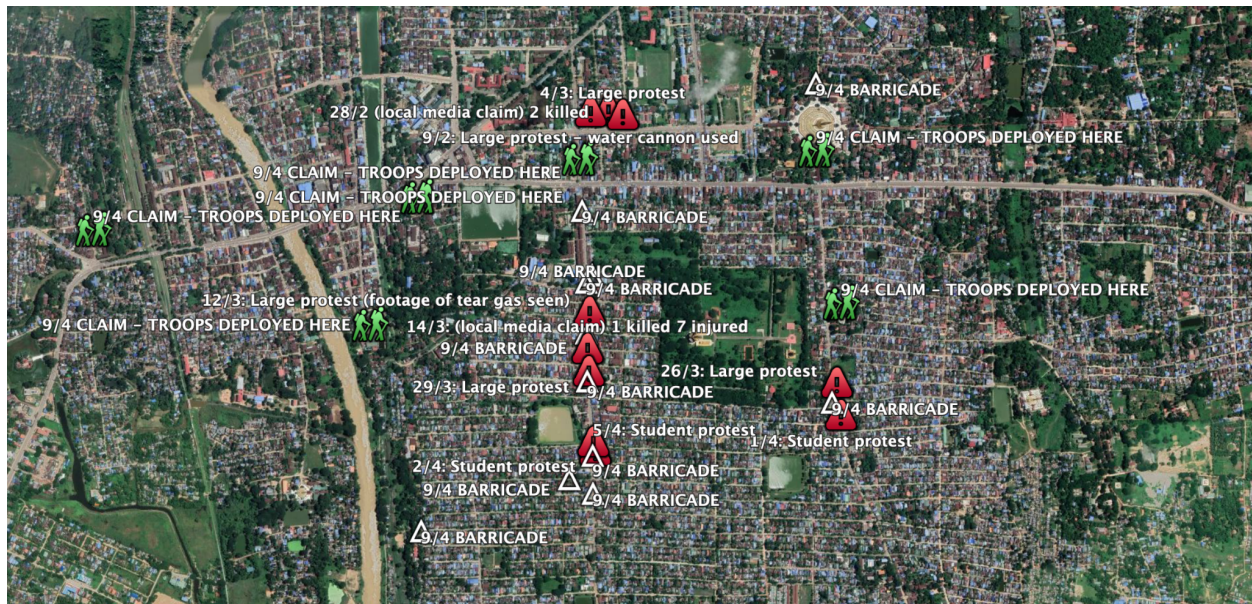


Image 19: Visualisation of the locations of demonstrations before April 9, as well as the known locations of where forces were either deployed, or known to have come from (Red triangles = previous protest; white triangles = protestor barricade on April 9; green figures = troop deployment on April 9).

April 9 - Visualisation of the security forces advance

Myanmar Witness has built a thorough picture of what happened on the ground in Bago on April 9 by analysing 71 separate pieces of verified data. This includes videos and images, social media posts and comments, and privately submitted information collected by Myanmar Witness. This is triangulated with witness statements collected by the Washington Post and NHK News.

The map below indicates the videos and photos (marked in green) geolocated by Myanmar Witness. These were the locations where the majority of protestors were gathered and then subsequently turned and ran south as security forces (marked in red) advanced. The blue markers indicate the known locations of barricades constructed by the demonstrators. The grey shapes indicate the wards.

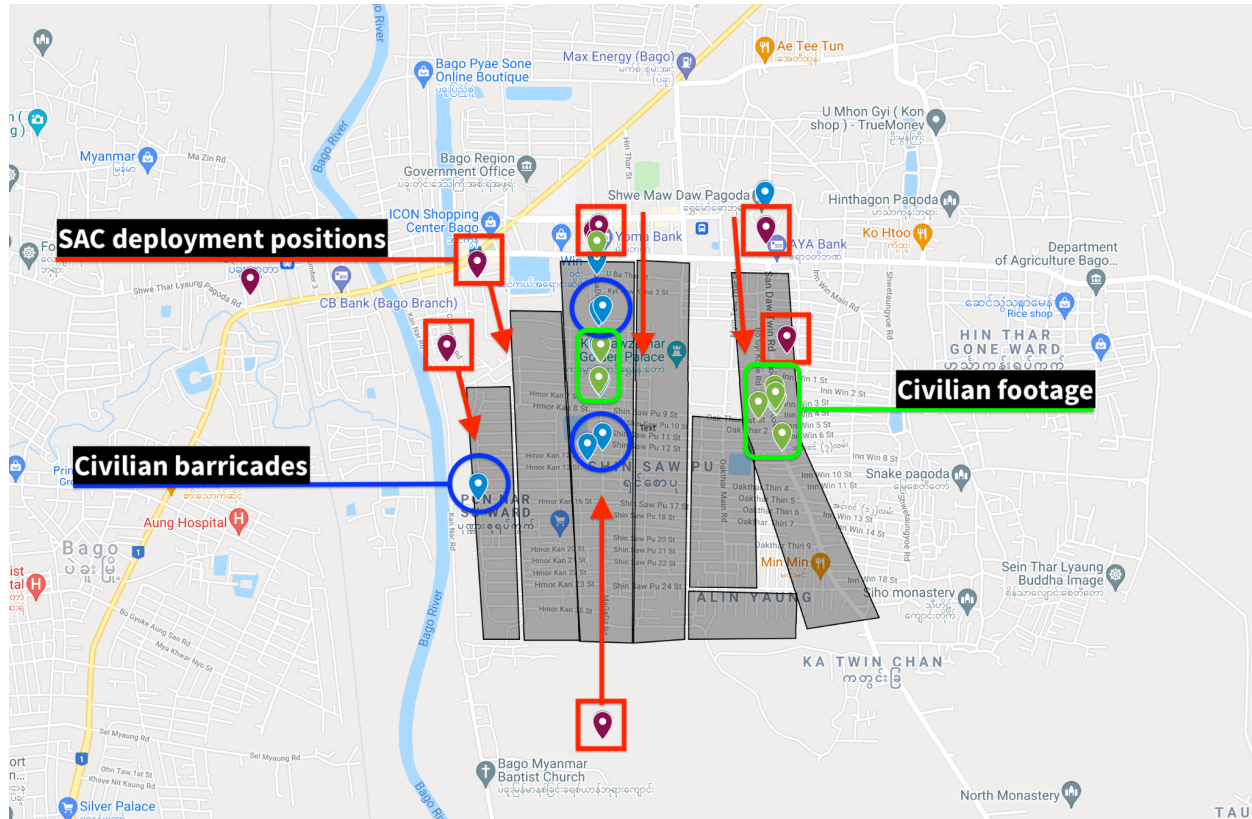


Image 20: Visualisation of the material collected by Myanmar Witness indicating the locations of footage and imagery in green, protest barricades and street blocks in blue, and the deployment of SAC forces on April 9 in red boxes. The red arrows indicate direction of travel of the SAC.

The majority of footage verified by Myanmar Witness was geolocated to MagaDit Road located [here](#) and San Daw Twin Road, located [here](#). These two roads have been highlighted on the satellite map below.

Taken in combination, all the footage suggests a strategy by security forces to attack the demonstrators from the north, and move them south down both MagaDit and San Daw Twin Roads. Demonstrators were then effectively trapped on MagaDit Road when they fled south, as a unit deployed at the south of the street moved north. This ‘boxed’ in protestors, forcing them to flee to the east into the parkland and suburban area between the two main roads.



Image 21: Visualisation of the two main streets involved in the attack on the demonstrators in Bago by SAC forces, and the direction of travel of those forces.

This movement is consistent with images of people with backpacks fleeing the area to the south of Bago city. Images uploaded to social media from April 9 showed groups of people fleeing the area and moving south along the field (Image 22) ([Google Maps](#)).



Image 22: Geolocation of people fleeing through fields just south of where the SAC was attacking demonstrators.

April 9 - Destruction of protest barricades

Locations of possible barricades can be confirmed through mapped open source material. Where videos and photos from, or before, April 9 showed barricades and that footage was geolocated to satellite imagery, exact locations could be identified. Some of these barricades were also identified through witness interviews conducted by NHK News as well as Washington Post.



Image 23: Geolocation of protestor- constructed barricades in Bago City using footage, images and eyewitness interviews obtained by NHK News and Washington Post.

These barricades were primarily constructed of sandbags, as seen in the screenshot from video footage below (now removed from social media but archived by Myanmar Witness and available on request). This was one of the pieces of footage geolocated by Myanmar Witness to [this exact location](#) on MagaDit Road. The footage was filmed early in the morning on April 9, during the attack and its location can be confirmed by references to Google Street view (as seen below with the orange house seen in both images and circled in the bottom image).



Images 24 and 25: Geolocation of one of the barricades on MagaDit Road

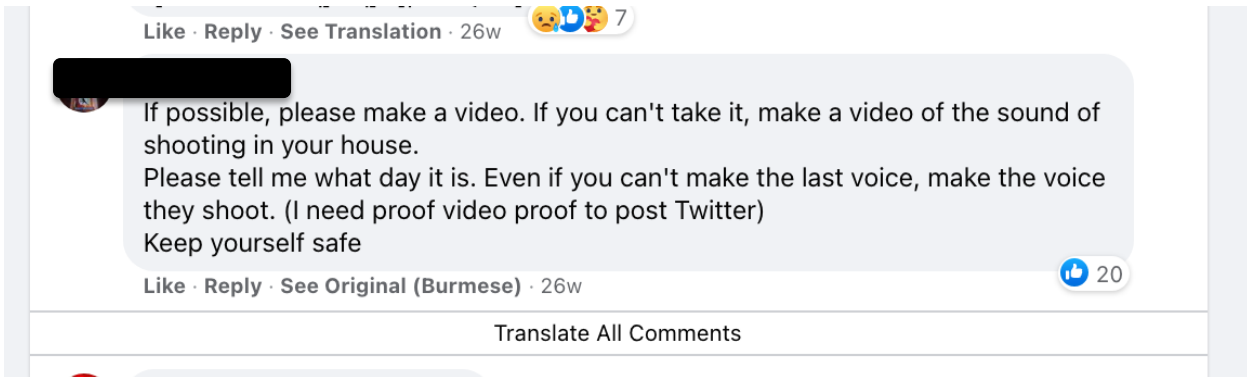
April 9 - Use of lethal and heavy weapons by SAC forces

Much of the footage collected by Myanmar Witness includes what sounds like gunshots while protestors fled the barricaded positions. There were also claims on social media of heavier, more explosive weapon systems used by security forces.

An example of the type of footage verified by Myanmar Witness can be seen [here](#) with people fleeing while the sounds of gunshots are heard. This footage was geolocated to [this location](#) on MagaDit Road. Much larger explosions were heard in footage uploaded that morning on social

media, claiming to be from Bago (available on request). This is consistent with claims documented by [international media](#), as well as unverified audio recordings posted on social media (available on request) that indicate a high rate of gunfire and claims of the use of RPGs in Bago against the protestors.

There were also social media comments that recommended people in Bago take audio recordings to hear the gunfire.



Widespread claims of the use of RPGs in Bago were shared on social media, along with images claiming to be shrapnel from those rounds (Image 30 and 31).



Images 30 and 31: Images uploaded to social media of what appears to be RPG shrapnel

More images of these RPGs were also uploaded to social media by a ‘citizen journalist’ (Image 32 and 33). This round was an unexploded ordnance and was claimed to be in the home of a person living in Bago.



Images 32 and 33: Images uploaded to social media of what appears to be RPG rounds

The following paragraphs describe how Myanmar Witness investigated these claims, first by matching the images to Bago, and then by identifying exactly what the casings were from, and who is likely to have used them.

First, by carefully inspecting the images, and cross-referencing with other social media collected by Myanmar Witness, we identified a unique match between two images (see below): one of which was the image of shrapnel seen above, and one that was used in an article by the [Irrawaddy](#) reporting on the violence in Bago.



Images 34 and 35: Picture of RPG round reported to have been used in Bago, matched with a separate image from local media reporting showing the aftermath of the violence

The match was identified due to the colouring, layout, and lettering on the door seen on the image on the left, with that seen on the right. The visual confirmation of the match can be seen in the two images below.



Image 36: Verification of visual match of RPG shrapnel to Irrawaddy image.

Given this match, the imagery was then geolocated to this exact location on [San Daw Twin Road](#). It was claimed through eyewitness testimony obtained by [NHK News](#) in collaboration with Myanmar Witness that there was a barricade demolished in the image, this was also consistent with what [Irrawaddy](#) reported in the image as well.

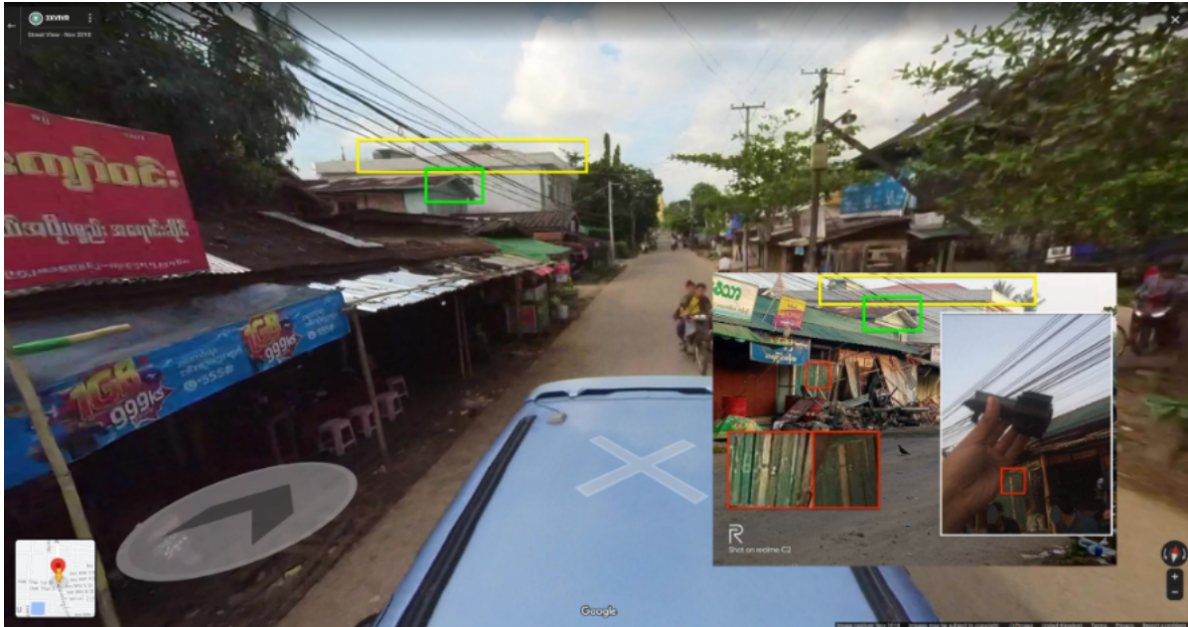


Image 37: Verification of location of RPG shrapnel to San Daw Twin Road.

Myanmar Witness was also able to identify the ordnance in the photograph as an MG-2 which is a 40mm High Explosive Dual Purpose rifle grenade. Hence, the report linking these images to RPG remnants was inaccurate. This identification has been achieved by comparing the image above with OSINT material depicting small arms and light weapons produced and used in Myanmar. In particular the ordnance above has been found to match one found in a photograph attached to [this article](#), published as an online blog in November 2018, and supposedly taken at the Defence Services Museum in Naypyidaw. This photograph also confirms the size and name of this piece of ammunition, depicted on the left (Image 38).



Image 38: Photograph taken inside the Defence Services Museum in Naypyidaw (PRAC most certainly stands for “practice rounds”, hence the blue colour).

Additionally, further OSINT inquiries produced this photograph (Image 39) posted in 2020 on a [Facebook page](#) used exclusively to comment and report on Myanmar's defence products. The photograph was taken at the Defence and Security 2019 arms fair, as confirmed by [this video](#), which at 02:22 depicts the box photographed below (Image 40), and by [this blog post](#) from a Thai-based military blog which also shares photographs from the event (Image 41). The same ordnance is depicted on the left of the box, with the same size, name and type reported on a label next to it.



Image 39: photo taken at an arms fair and posted on a Facebook page.



Image 40: still from YouTube video filming the Myanmar Defence Industry stall at an arms fair.



Image 41: Photograph taken at the Myanmar Defence Industry stall at an arms fair 2019

The rifle grenades found in this material obtained through OSINT searches match with the tail-fins of the grenade retrieved in Bago, and also with other intact ones found via social media which were not geolocated but were shared in connection with the events unfolding in Bago on April 9, 2021 (Image 32 and 33).

OSINT inquiries and the analysis of retrieved material have also confirmed that this type of rifle grenade is fired from the barrel of rifles of the MA-series, which are standard issue for the Tatmadaw (Image 42 and 43)



Image 42: MG-2 grenade attached to MA-4 Mk. I assault rifle of the Tatmadaw, sourced from [here](#).



Image 43: MG-2 grenade attached to MA-1 Mk. I assault rifle, sourced from [here](#).

Myanmar Witness has been unable to directly link the use of the MG-2 rifle grenade in Bago to the Tatmadaw due to lack of a visual link with the firing of the ammunition in the retrieved OSINT material. However, other evidence of repression in Bago by the Army that day and the absence of any evidence indicating that other parties may have ever deployed MG-2 rifle grenades suggests that Myanmar's Army personnel would have been the only actors able to actually field and fire them.

April 9 - Armed protestors and defensive measures

It is important to note that not all protestors fled the barricades on April 9, and not all demonstrators were unarmed. Some attempted to stay and launched fireworks and homemade projectiles at the advancing SAC forces.



Image 26: Visual signs of fireworks used as projectiles from one of the barricades on MagaDit Road.

There were also groups amongst the demonstrators that clashed with SAC forces that appeared to be armed, with a mix of homemade rifles, or manufactured weapon systems. As they are homemade weapons (from our analysis they appear to be largely made from welded pipes), it is not possible to establish model and make in accordance with our usual levels of analysis. Below are some examples of the arms that were visible in footage filmed at one of the barricades on MagaDit Road, at [this location](#).



Images 27, 28, and 29: Footage of armed protesters on April 9 in Bago City.

Alleged involvement of 77 Light Infantry Division

Myanmar Witness has not verified strong visual footage of the 77 Light Infantry Division's direct involvement in the shooting of protestors from April 9. However there are findings that are consistent with claims of 77 LID involvement in the events.

A collaborative investigation between Myanmar Witness and [Washington Post](#) collected at least seven interviews with eyewitnesses, some of whom said 77 LID soldiers were seen involved in the April 9 crackdown.

[Myanmar Now](#) has also mentioned the 77 LID's involvement in Bago's protests, when in early April, it was claimed that "troops from Light Infantry Division 77, stationed nearby, started shouting threats" at demonstrators.

When considering these claims, it should be noted that there is an active military base near to Bago City, which is located less than 2km from the site of where the attack on protestors happened on April 9.

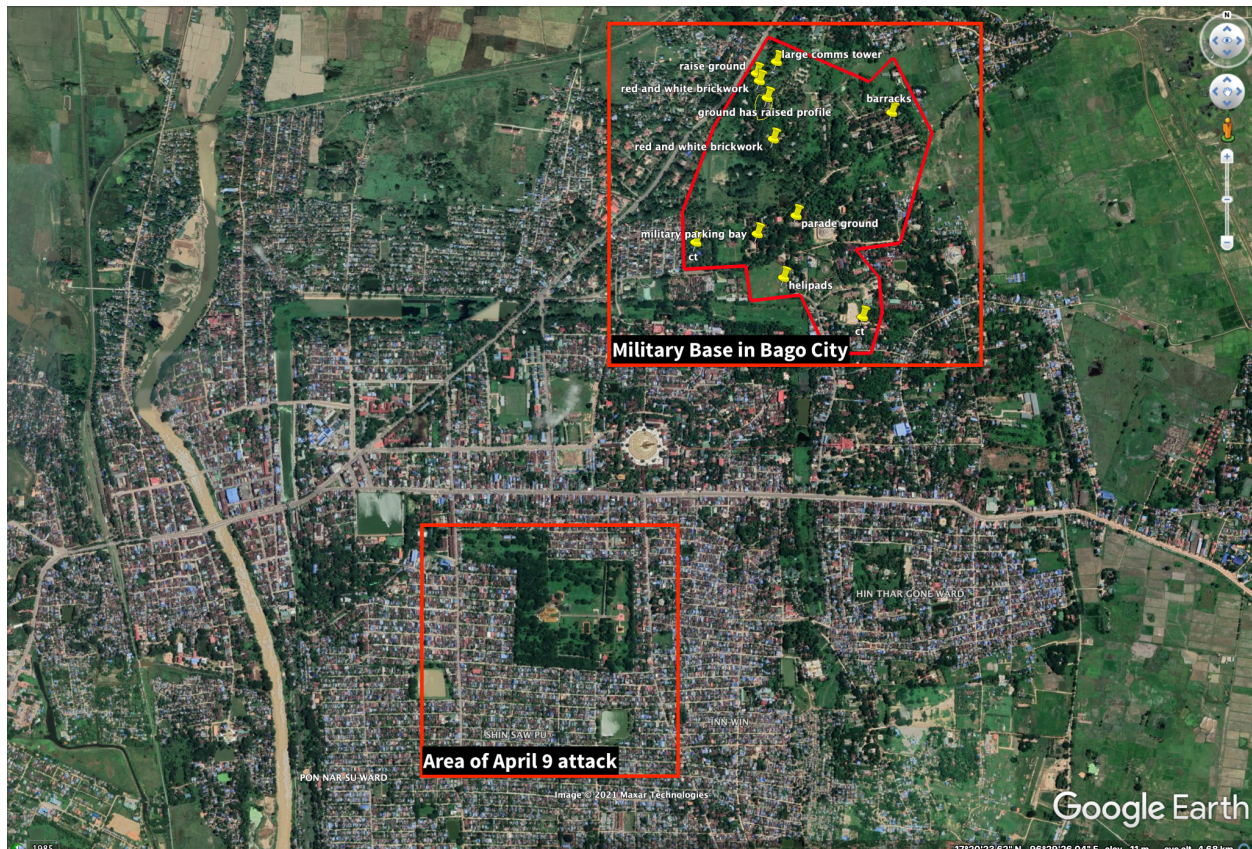


Image 44: Map illustrating location of military base.

The entrance of the military base is located [here](#). Myanmar Witness has identified posts from a ceremony in 2019, where the 77 LID was stationed at the base. These images were posted

online by [Z+ Plus News](#). The images confirm that soldiers from 77 LID were previously based in the military base and that there was at least one senior field officer present in the images (Lieutenant Colonel)



Image 45: Photograph of insignia of 77 Light Infantry Division.

The images from the 2019 ceremony were geolocated by Myanmar Witness to the base, specifically around its entrance from the [Yangon - Mandalay Highway](#). The geolocation of these images can be seen below.



Images 46, 47 and 48: Geolocation of military ceremony.