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Dispatch from Mandalay: Earthquake in the Midst of Civil War

“Even we don't know what's going on in this country.”

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The workers are clearing the rubble. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang

On March 28, 2025, a 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck Myanmar. The tremors reached as far as Thailand—a country that rarely experiences earthquakes—leaving many Thai people stunned, saying they hadn't felt such a strong quake in decades. In an instant, videos and photos flooded international and social media: apartment buildings swaying, rooftop pools turning into waterfalls, construction sites collapsing, walls cracking, and plaster crumbling off.

I messaged my friend Jonn, who goes to university in Thailand (the original message was in English): “I remember your hometown is in Mandalay, right?” He replied, “Yes. Our house is damaged.” He sent photos taken by relatives still living in Mandalay—the interior was in chaos, the walls riddled with cracks.



The damaged house of Jonn’s family. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang

On April 1, a humanitarian aid organization invited me to film the post-earthquake situation in Mandalay. Myanmar was unfamiliar territory to me. Like many others, when I think of Myanmar, what comes to mind are scams and civil war.

I decided to go. I booked a flight from Bangkok to Yangon for April 4. I arranged to meet two journalists flying in from China (one of them I'll refer to as “C”) at the Yangon airport in the afternoon. We would stay overnight in Yangon and head to Mandalay the next morning, on April 5.

The night before departure, the two journalists and their local guide Zhang were having dinner together. We chatted with Zhang, a third-generation Yunnanese immigrant who now teaches Chinese and English. I said, “Your Chinese is really good.” He replied, “I grew up watching *Kangxi Lai Le*—especially Xiao S. I learned from watching her.”



The building that collapsed in the earthquake; the first floor has been completely destroyed. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang

On the road from Yangon to Mandalay on April 5, we passed several police and military checkpoints. Every time we neared one, Zhang would say, “Quick, hide your phones. Don’t let the police see you using them.” At the final checkpoint before entering Mandalay, soldiers interrogated us about why these Chinese nationals were heading there. The driver “lied”: “They’re attending an international conference.” The soldier let us pass. Zhang said, “He actually knew there *wasa* conference nearby—otherwise, we wouldn’t have gotten through.”

In the car, Zhang said: “I don’t even know why they’re fighting anymore—the junta and the resistance. In China during the Anti-Japanese War, people were fighting to drive out invaders. But here... what are we even fighting for?”

That day marked the eighth day since the earthquake. News reports said the military junta had continued airstrikes on rebel-controlled areas, causing heavy civilian casualties.

The trip from Yangon to Mandalay takes 10–12 hours, with spotty mobile reception. We napped through the day. Along the way we saw aid vehicles, damaged roads, and construction workers. By 7 p.m., as we approached Mandalay, we passed the airport and saw planes still landing. Since the quake, the airport had been damaged, and commercial flights had been suspended—these were likely rescue planes. The sky darkened. Entering the city, the lights were dim. Dust filled the air from the quake. The local guide said the damage wasn’t as exaggerated as outsiders believed—maybe 5% of the buildings collapsed—but nearly all standing structures had internal cracks.



The hotel walls are riddled with cracks. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang

Sure enough, when we arrived at the hotel, the lobby and hallways had clearly been freshly repainted to hide cracks. In my room, cracks still lined the walls, and dust covered the furniture. Across the street stood a collapsed three-story building: the first floor had been completely crushed, and the remaining two stories leaned precariously to one side. Debris, personal belongings, and shattered glass littered the front. A young man at the hotel front desk said a 19-year-old died there.

The next day, Jonn's friend Kay drove me around town. Almost every street had a collapsed or visibly damaged building. At some sites, people worked together to clear rubble—smashing debris with power tools, loading it into bamboo baskets, then onto trucks. At the half-collapsed, five-story “Great Wall Hotel,” excavators were tearing down unstable sections for a full demolition. Russian and local firefighters coordinated nearby. At a site with dozens of pagodas, all had been damaged or toppled. While filming, a man emerged from a nearby tent. Through my translator, I asked, “Where did you used to live?” He pointed across the road to a pale green four-story apartment building. Upon closer inspection, the building leaned forward, the base severely damaged, window frames dangling, debris scattered below: clothes, toys, furniture, even trophies. A dog darted in and out of the ruins—perhaps searching for its owner or a child.



Three-story house leveled by the earthquake. No casualties. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang

The next day, Jonn's younger brother Tristan took me to their home, a four-story standalone building. Jonn later told me the building was 25–30 years old—built before he was born. From the outside, the house looked fine, but Tristan said, “We have to demolish it and rebuild.” Inside was chaos—cracks everywhere, broken tiles and peeling plaster. They had already moved out what belongings they could. Next to the house was their family warehouse, where the family was now living. I asked, “Aren't you afraid the building might collapse on the warehouse?” He said, “We slept on the street for a few nights. But last night it rained hard, so we moved into the warehouse.” I asked Tristan about his plans. He said, “I'm 17 now. I *must* leave Myanmar before I turn 18, or I'll be drafted.”

Jonn explained: since the 2021 military coup, anyone aged 18–35 faces mandatory conscription. Once conscripted, they lose all contact with family, can't resign, and the worst-case scenario is dying in combat—with no compensation. The junta just wants bodies to use as shields. Tristan's draft number is 312. Jonn hasn't dared return for years—he'd be arrested at the airport.

That afternoon, Tristan took me to a large open field in the city center, now an earthquake refugee camp, crowded with colorful tents. While filming, I noticed most Burmese adults had a strong aversion to the camera. Even from afar, many would turn away, hide their faces, or drop what they were doing. The military tightly controls media and the internet. They don't want the world to know what's happening. Being filmed or interviewed is dangerous here—making it incredibly hard for the outside world to

understand the true situation in this near-anarchic country.



Earthquake-destroyed stupa within the temple grounds. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang

On my last night in Mandalay, I stumbled upon a rescue scene downtown. Russian and local teams were searching through the rubble of a collapsed building. Dozens of civilians watched anxiously behind a police line—some may have lived there. Military personnel supervised the operation. Nearby sat medics in hazmat suits. From a distance, a diesel engine roared. Rescue workers used saws and drills. Suddenly, the engine stopped. A Russian rescuer emerged with a woman's handbag, handing it to people at the police line to identify. Moments later, another rescuer signaled for the medics. They brought a stretcher and body bag. They soon carried out a body. Everyone rushed forward despite the stench. A woman in red stood frozen—she had recognized the body as a relative.

Once the body was identified, the medics quickly loaded it into the ambulance and slammed the door shut. The siren screamed through the dimming streets, announcing another death. The woman in red collapsed in tears, supported by family as they stumbled behind the departing ambulance.



Post-earthquake displacement: Residents living in temporary tents in central Mandalay.
Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang

The next day, I boarded a bus from Mandalay back to Yangon. We passed many police and military checkpoints. Around 7 p.m., as we neared the city, the bus was stopped by police. As usual, the attendant collected local ID cards. A police officer boarded and walked toward me, the bus attendant following behind. Seeing me still on my phone, the attendant gestured frantically for me to hide it. I shoved it behind me.

The officer stood beside me and said in Chinese, “Ni hao.” Then he spoke in Burmese. Luckily, a young man in front of me spoke English and helped translate: “The officer says you must pay 100,000 kyat (about \$50 USD) because foreigners aren’t allowed on this bus.” I shouted in anger: “When I bought the ticket online and boarded the bus, *no one* told me foreigners weren’t allowed. This isn’t right!” The man continued negotiating. “He says if you don’t pay, you must get off and speak to his superior. They’ll also confiscate your passport.” I saw a bundle of passports in the officer’s hand—5 to 8 of them in various colors—and realized this was just a shakedown.

I said, “I don’t have any kyat left. Do you want \$100?” I was nervous. If I refused and got off, they had guns—what if something happened? I also feared they’d search all my devices. Seeing I had no kyat, the officer left. As he walked away, I shouted, “This is a motherfxxer!”



Demolition of the structurally unsound Great Wall Hotel. Nearby, Myanmar (orange) and Russian (blue) rescue teams take a break. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang



An apartment building destroyed by the earthquake. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang



A teenager carries mangled rebar as he walks out from the collapsed ruins. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang

Once the bus left the checkpoint, the young man turned and said, “You can use your phone again now.” I was still furious. “See? This is how they extort foreigners every day.” He replied, “Since the 2021 coup, this kind of police extortion has become routine.” I thanked him—without his help, who knows what might've happened? We chatted. He was studying design in Yangon; his brother had already moved to the UK. He couldn't leave because he had to care for his parents in Mandalay. Their house was damaged, but the family was safe. He showed me photos of the damage. To escape conscription, he said, you need an acceptance letter from a foreign school—and connections to pay bribes.

A young woman sitting across from me also joined the conversation. She asked where I was from. I said China. She said she was a photographer in Yangon. The bus arrived at the terminal, so we exchanged Instagram handles.

Later, she messaged me: “I felt sad and ashamed for that soldier on the bus.” I replied: at least now I know how to deal with this kind of extortion.

I asked her, “Why haven't you left?” She said: “I have to support my parents. I haven't been drafted yet.” I said, “I've read a lot about the civil war here. It's so hard to understand.” She replied: “Even we don't know what's going on in this country.”



Displaced from the green apartment block behind him, a man waits under a tree with his salvaged belongings. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang



A Buddhist temple collapsed following the earthquake. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang



Clearing the ruins. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang



Earthquake damage at the Great Wall Hotel. Total casualties unknown.
Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang



Collapsed residential structure. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang



Evacuation center, central Mandalay. Photo: Patrick Chengzhi Wang