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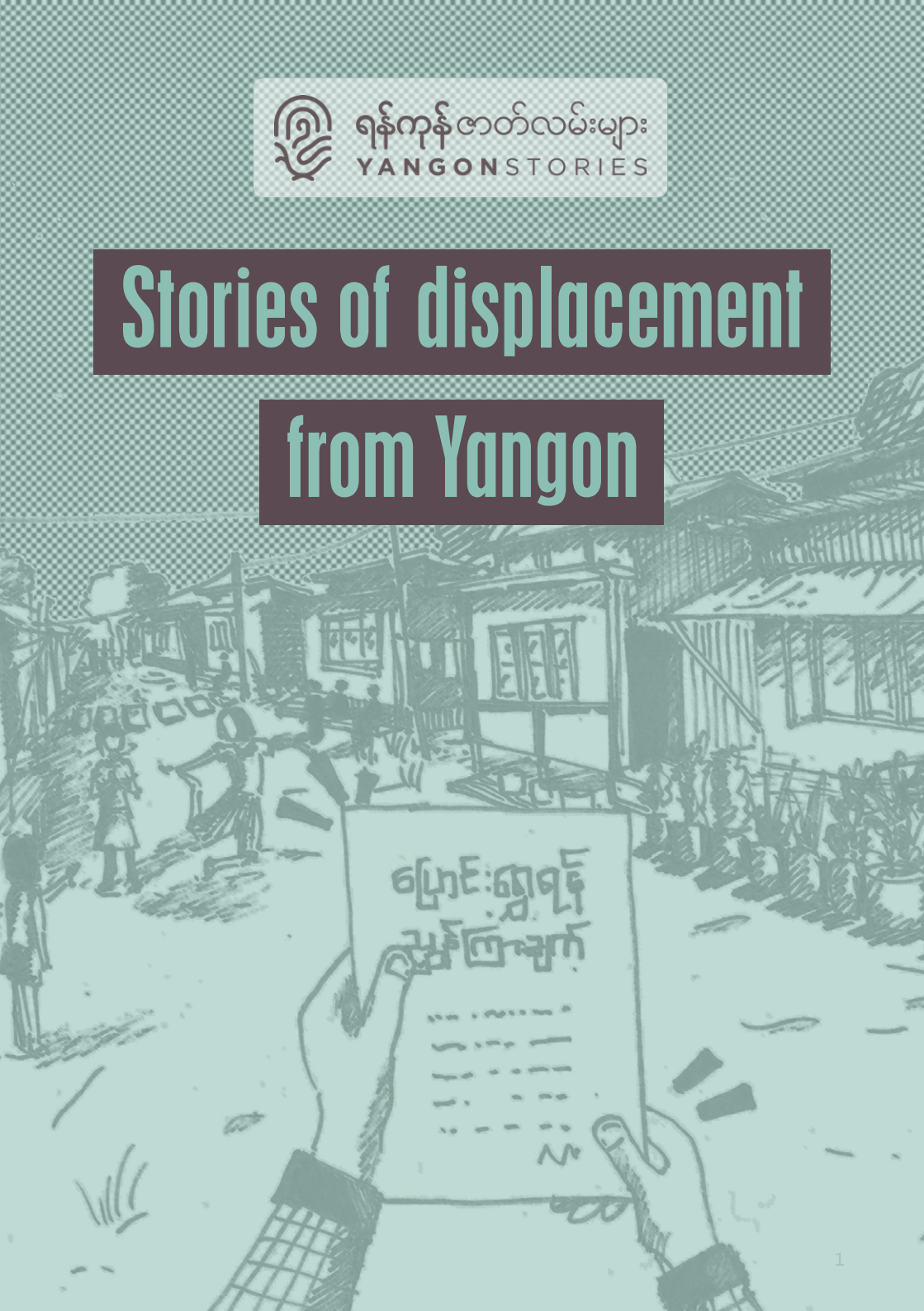
YANGONSTORIES

Stories of displacement from Yangon



Stories of displacement from Yangon

WHY DO PEOPLE LIVE IN 'INFORMAL' SETTLEMENTS?

The double bind of development projects

Buying land that you don't own

Priced out and forced into informality

Being invisible in Yangon's hostels

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SQUATTER STRUGGLES AND RESISTANCE SINCE THE COUP

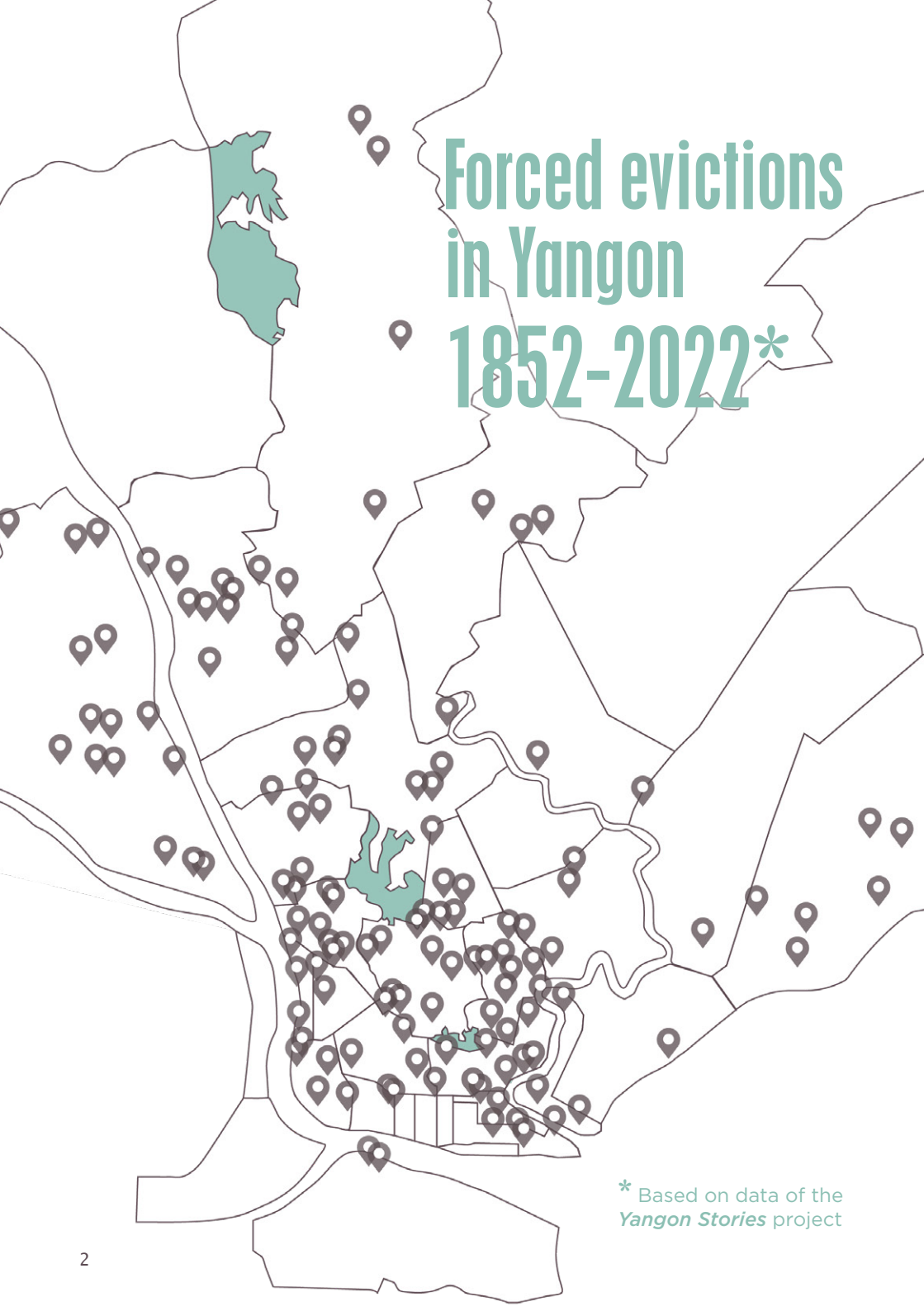
Standing her ground at all costs

The blurry boundaries between 'formal' & 'informal'

No one is spared from eviction

Resistance from the grassroots people

Forced evictions in Yangon 1852-2022*



* Based on data of the ***Yangon Stories*** project

A few words on evictions in Yangon

The practice of forcibly removing people from their places of residence has been used historically in Yangon for several reasons: to free up space for redevelopment projects, to curb and punish resistance to the regime, and to fulfil the vision of a 'beautiful' city in which poor settlements have apparently no place. It seems that regardless of the political landscape, Yangon's squatters have always had the short end of the stick. Since the military coup d'etat in early 2021, security forces started a new, massive wave of evictions against informal dwellers, often without an explanation or notice. And, expectedly, without any compensation or provisions for resettlement.

Observing the limited attention these incidents received and the, at times, negative sentiment against 'informal' residents, we wanted to shed some light on the context that has driven many of them into squalor and the multiple impacts of such evictions on thousands upon thousands of families and the city as a whole, as well as highlight their important role in mobilisation and resistance. For that, we worked with artists and illustrators from within and outside Myanmar, who translated the stories into powerful images that will help preserve the memories of people and places, and raise awareness about the struggles of Yangon's poor residents. We would like to thank our contributors who stay anonymous for their safety.

***

This booklet is dedicated to all the people who shared their stories of uprooting and all those whose stories remain untold.

Disclaimer: The stories in this booklet are based on interviews that were conducted between 2018 and 2022. The names of people and places are changed to avoid identification, and certain details are modified for storytelling purposes. This booklet was compiled as part of the project "Yangon Stories" funded by the British Academy and follows UK GDPR principles.

SQUATTERS IN MONASTERY TO BE GOT RID OF

(The Nation, 1959)

In a speech broadcast over Rangoon Radio, on the eve of the first **"mass attack" on dirt and filth** in four wards of the city, Col. Tun Sein said the first phase of his task included: (1) revitalising the Corporation; (2) the actual cleaning out of the accumulated dirt; (3) educating the public on its responsibilities and (4) flushing out and repairing the drains.
The second phase included such tasks as: **(1) clearing out obstructions on the pavements and unauthorized stalls and bazaars; (2) removing hutments;** (3) repairing the roads; (4) ensuring adequate water supplies and (5) restoring the sewage system.

Cleaning of the City's streets would be carried out both on day and night shifts. **These tasks would be tackled on a planned, co-ordinated basis like any military operation.**

(The Nation, 1958)

Laymen who had found living accommodation in the Thayettaw Kyaungdaik are to **move out at the soonest possible moment.**
There are 2,000 families who have set up homes in the Kyaungdaik.

Drastic Clean-up Revives Rangoon

(The New York Times, 1959)

An "ugly" squatter settement...

...converted into a "pleasant" park (1960).

(Government of the Union of Burma, 1960)

နေဝံဖေးလမ်းအိမ်များဖျက်မည်

The small-lane squatters were alarmed to demolish due to fire risk (The Hanthawaddy, 1963)

Why do people live in 'informal' settlements?

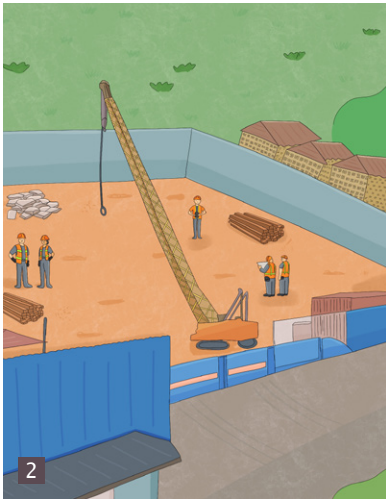
It needs to be understood that people who live in squatter settlements, commonly referred to as ***kyu kyaw***, usually have no other option to access land and housing. While adequate shelter is a basic human right, there are very few measures in place to guarantee that right, especially for very poor and vulnerable people. Some lack documentation and are denied formal housing; others have fled disasters and conflicts and arrived in Yangon with nothing; many have been simply priced out from their former neighbourhoods. The government's evictions have, in fact, led many people into informality since they were forced to leave or demolish their houses and could not afford a new place without compensation and support.

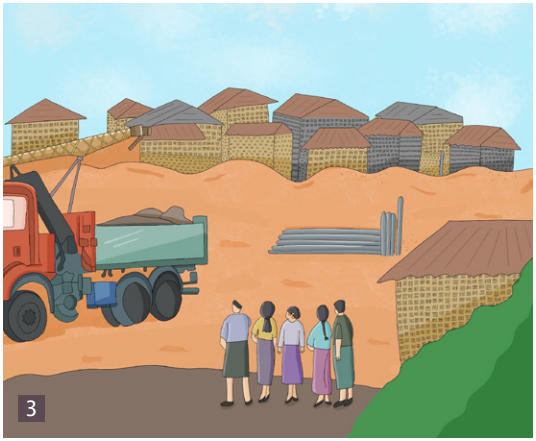
The double bind of development projects

The dynamic development of Yangon has triggered a lot of internal migration, with people moving from one part of the city to another to find work in the new industrial zones and various urban projects. This movement is encouraged when investors need a workforce for their businesses, but families are left uncertain when their plans change. Development projects may mean potential income for the poor, but they also represent their displacement and a continuous fear that their neighbourhood might be the next to be evicted.

▲ U Kyaw moved to Dagon Seikkan from Thaketa township in the early 1990s to work on a new construction project by the government. Dagon Seikkan was just established at that time, and construction workers were in high demand.

▼ His family left their rental home in Thaketa to be closer to U Kyaw's work. Construction workers would be allowed to build their houses on the compound to reduce commuting time.





▲ However, after many delays, the project was discontinued. U Kyaw had no work, and he had already given up their last house in Thaketa.

▼ After considering their limited options, the family decided to stay right there; on a tiny part of the land that was going to be developed but was left empty for the time being.

▲ This is what many other families did, who faced a similar situation. No one interfered with them at that time about building their houses there. After all, they would have been allowed to stay if the project had continued.

▼ The area became more populated over time, and the people living there started building their own infrastructure and organizing for their own development.

◄ Every few years, rumours resurfaced that the land would be developed and all families would move. How is it fair that companies and authorities change their minds without any consequences, but the poor have to stay in constant fear?

Buying land that you don't own

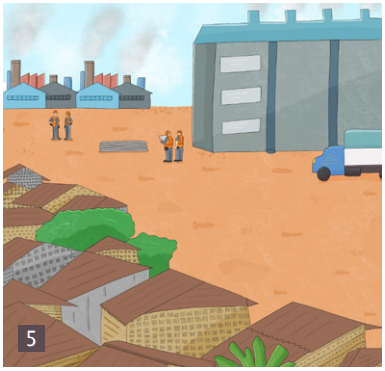
Many people have arrived in Yangon as migrants from rural areas, especially after the devastating cyclone Nargis in 2008. Looking for a secure environment to rebuild their lives, but not being familiar with the complicated procedures of transferring land, many of them have been caught in situations where they bought land from farmers, only to find out that the land belongs to someone else, and that their purchase is not recognized.

▲ Ko Than came to Yangon in 2009. He comes from a village in the Ayeyarwaddy Region, but cyclone Nargis destroyed everything; his land, his crop, his home.

▼ He didn't know anyone in Yangon at that time. Finding a place to stay and finding a new job was very difficult. His family stayed in a hostel for the first few months.

▲ Then he was lucky enough to meet someone in Nyaung village who was selling a small plot of land. He and his wife thought they could afford it if they put all their savings together.

▼ They took a loan as well, and they finally made it. They got a certificate of purchase from the landowner and started building their small house.



▲ The area became more crowded in the following years, and big projects started being built, like factories. Ko Than thought this could help people find more jobs.

▲ But one day, an eviction notice was passed around our area. It said a company bought the land, and everyone would have to leave. How could this happen? They paid money for that land...

◄ Ko Than insisted that this was their land, but no one believed him. Instead, they just replied that the certificate was not valid. “We did not even get compensation. We had no choice but to leave our house,” he explained.

Priced out and forced into informality

With the rapid development of Yangon, it is not only migrants that are forced into informality but also long-term residents facing skyrocketing rent prices. Many families are dealing with a shrinking space to find affordable housing, and they have no choice but to move further out to the city's periphery. Informal arrangements are often the only choice left to them to have a roof over their head. But these arrangements also imply a lot of precarity, challenges, and the threat of eviction.

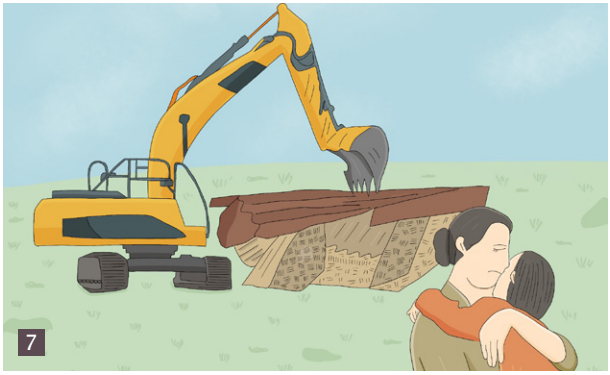
▼ Ma Ei Myat grew up in Kamaryut. After she got married and her family grew, they decided to find their own place. So they rented a small space in Hlaing, near her parents.

▲ They used to pay 40,000 Kyat per month, but the rent kept going up year by year. At some point, the amount was double of what it was in the beginning, but their income was staying the same.

▲ They thought that moving further out would be better because the rent would be cheaper. Finally, they found a good deal in Insein; a landlord rented them his extra room built on the roadside. Because the house was informal, the price was low enough for Ma Ei Myat's family to afford.

▲ There were many restrictions. For example, Ma Ei Myat normally made a living by selling curry, but she could not cook inside the room because there was no space, and the owners complained.

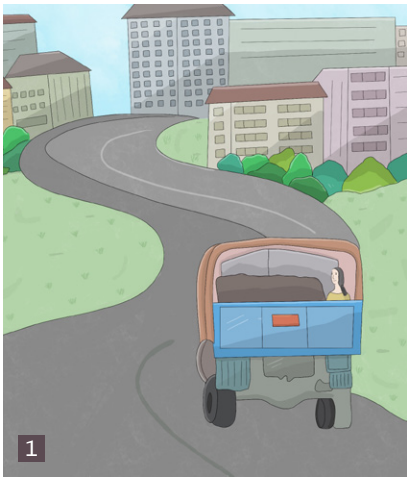
▼ The pandemic made it even more difficult to get income. They could not go out and work; their children could not go to school. But at least they had a home.



◄ Recently, all the houses on the roadside were demolished and all the families had to leave. The letter said, "to make the road wider." But where are these families supposed to go with no income and no support?

Being invisible in Yangon's hostels

Hostels are one of the cheapest forms of accommodation for migrant workers—especially newly arrived ones. In Hlaingthaya alone, there are estimated more than 10,000 of them, most of which operate informally without complying with infrastructure and space requirements. On the flip side, hostels are more flexible for those lacking documents, and they don't require the typical six-month upfront payment. Many hostel dwellers are not registered to ward or village tract authorities, thus remaining 'invisible'. Hostels are the last resort for many, despite the cramped and poor conditions they often have.



▲ Ma Nwet migrated to Hlaingthaya from Rakhine in 2016 to escape the re-emerging conflict and have a better chance of finding a job. Sadly, she had lost her national registration card when she was leaving her village in a rush.

▼ Like many others, she found accommodation in one of the township's many hostels. She considered herself lucky to be accepted without having her documents.

▲ The hostel owner helped her with a recommendation letter to get a job at a local factory and she also gave some 'tea money' to bypass the requirement for an NRC. The pay was low, but she used to think it was better than nothing.

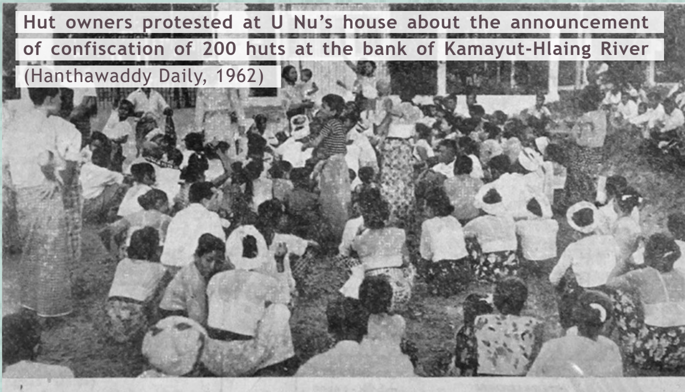
▼ When the pandemic reached the country, she lost her job as the factory stopped its operation. Due to the lockdown order, she needed to stay at home without income.

◄ Even when some emergency assistance was distributed to other households, hostel dwellers often received nothing. How can such a cramped space, with so many families, remain invisible?

She was grateful that the hostel owner made small donations to all dwellers every other week. Some rice, cooking oil, and onions were just enough to get by.

▼ Yet, since the coup, things have been getting worse. The military started removing squatters, and suddenly the demand for hostel rooms skyrocketed.

▲ Hostel owners have been increasing their fees, so much so that Ma Nwet had no choice but to leave. Many people in a similar condition do not even have the means to pay the bus fare to go back to their villages. What will happen to them?



Hut owners protested at U Nu's house about the announcement of confiscation of 200 huts at the bank of Kamayut-Hlaing River (Hanthawaddy Daily, 1962)

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70 left homeless after pre-dawn raid

(The Myanmar Times, 2013)

Site Alotees in New Towns Must Live There

(The Guardian, 1959)

The scene in Yangon's Mingaladon township on Tuesday was like **a community building exercise in reverse.**

Starting in the morning, thousands of squatters living in the township's industrial zone frantically took down their simple wooden houses to avoid demolition and save the materials for later use. **They were being evicted.**

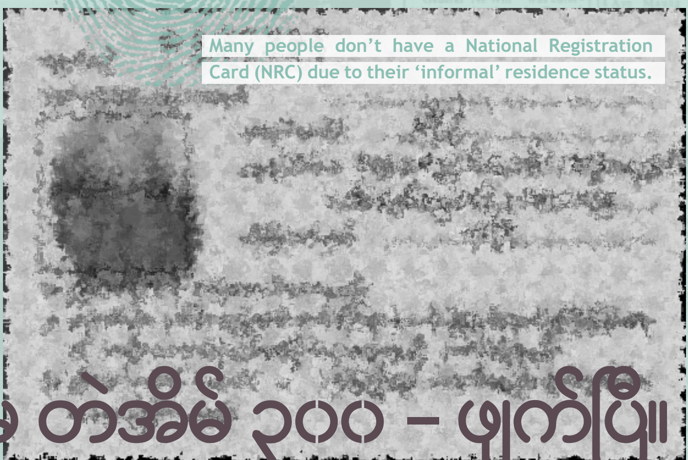
(Coconuts Yangon, 2016)

Police to toughen stance on 'disruptive elements'

(The Global New Light of Myanmar, 2016)

Over 10,000 Displaced Persons Find New Homes Outside City

(The Nation, 1958)



Many people don't have a National Registration Card (NRC) due to their 'informal' residence status.

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"300 huts were demolished in Insein" (The Hanthawaddy, 1962)

The various impacts of eviction

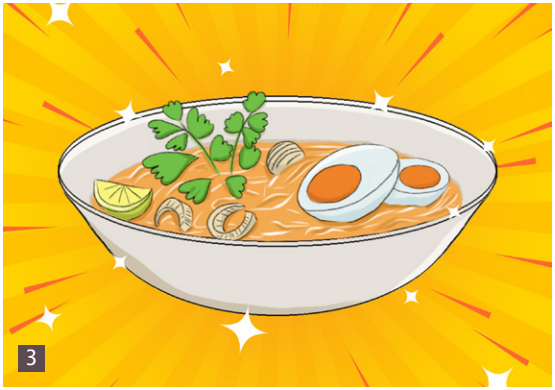
Evictions are a form of violence, of control exercised on people. Its implications are diverse. One of the most obvious consequences is that entire communities become homeless in a matter of days or weeks. People lose their hard-earned investments in their housing and infrastructure and are often left with nothing. Displacement from their neighbourhoods also means that they often lose their trusted clients, or are too far from their workplaces, and suffer a negative impact on their livelihoods. The emotional trauma this experience carries should not be underestimated either. Attachments to people and places are violently disrupted, social networks are threatened, and collective memories fade. Also, evictions do not 'solve' the issue they are supposed to address; on the contrary, they lead to a proliferation of informality since people are pushed more and more into poverty.

The impossibility of a stable livelihood

Informal dwellers are blamed for being poor through their own fault; however, the conditions that lead to and keep them in poverty are more often than not related to how systems exclude them and deny them treatment as equal citizens. Displacement adds another layer of challenges to people's already strained livelihood. Relocation without compensation and with no livelihood restoration measures has repeatedly meant that people lose their clients, are further away from their previous jobs, enter unfamiliar markets and face unemployment or reduced income.

▲ Ma Mu Eh used to be a farmer, growing rice in a paddy field outside Yangon. In 1988, the junta confiscated her land to convert it into a new township known today as Shwepyithar. Not only did she not get compensation, she even had to pay some administrative fees and, of course, pay for a new piece of land in a different area.

▼ Ma Mu Eh could no longer make a living from growing paddy in her new place, and she decided to sell her few belongings related to farming. Instead, she started to sell mohinga with her minimal resources.



▲ She is very proud of her mohinga and had been cooking and selling it every day for several years, on the exact same spot, between her home and a local factory.

▼ The workers coming early for their morning shift knew her by her name and appreciated her well-cooked soup with crispy chickpea fritters and fresh coriander.

▲ When Ma Mu Eh's community received an eviction notice, she became very worried. Even if she found another place to stay, how would she continue to make a living?

▲ Much like she expected, many challenges came with the eviction. Her trusted clients were too far away, and from the new place she managed to rent, it would be impossible to commute there daily.

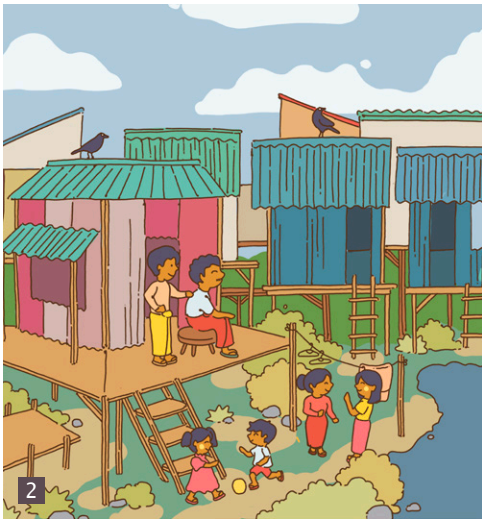
◄ On top of that, she figured that it was very difficult to get new clients to sell her delicious fish soup. "Each neighbourhood has its own market," she thought to herself as she got some strange looks from other street vendors.

Losing vital social networks

One of the consequences of forced evictions is the disruption of people's vital social networks. Particularly in contexts where they cannot access services and resources, they have often had to rely on each other to fill the gaps. These personal connections are so important, for example, to secure a job, look after each other's children, and share the responsibilities of cooking, going to the market, and cleaning their settlement.

▲ Ma Thinzar and her family had been living in a slum settlement in Dagon Seikkan for more than 12 years. That was ever since she moved to Yangon from her village in Sagaing.

▼ In the beginning, she did not know anyone and felt that her new neighbours looked at her with suspicion, but, over time, she got to form strong friendships with some of them.



▲ Because all faced similar challenges, they often helped each other with different daily tasks like looking after each other's children, cooking together, and collectively taking care of anyone sick.

▼ After their settlement was evicted, everyone headed in a different direction. Ma Thinzar and her family ended up in East Dagon and lost touch with their former neighbours.

▲ They struggled a lot to find a new spot for their household because the people in that area were suspicious of newcomers and were not welcoming.

▼ Everything felt much harder in their new little home because they no longer had their friends around. Ma Thinzar felt isolated, and when she had to go to work and leave her young children behind, she was worried if they were being looked after.

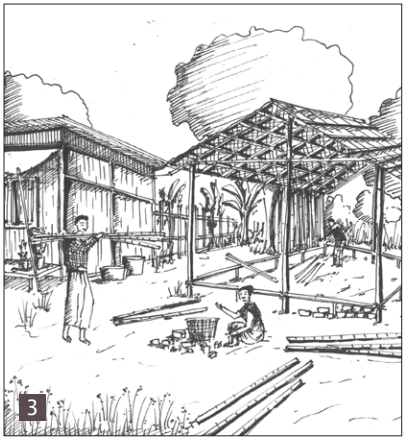
◄ Every move put an additional mental burden on the family and made them feel left alone to start their life from scratch, far from their families and friends.

Disruption of collective memories

When communities become displaced and lose their connections, it is like a piece of history is being lost. People living in informal settlements each carry the memories and knowledge of how the city has developed and how impactful events have shaped the country as a whole. These collective memories and knowledge are often kept alive through their daily practices and interactions and are at risk of fading and being lost and when these communal connections are interrupted.

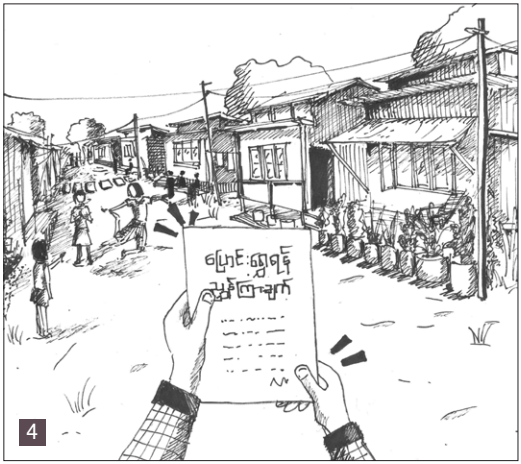
▲ U Ye Htet used to live in a small hut not too far from the Shwedagon pagoda in central Yangon. Back in 1988, his family and many others were resettled by the government to one of the new townships, called Shwepyithar.

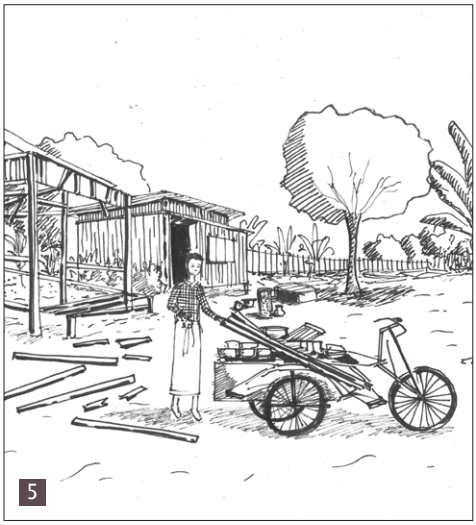
▼ He and some of his neighbours ended up in the same corner of the township. They would often meet at a local tea shop and recall the old times when they participated in demonstrations against the regime.



▲ With their limited resources, they always tried to help others who struggled to get housing by sharing their advice or mediating for a rented room. They knew the challenge of having to start from scratch too well.

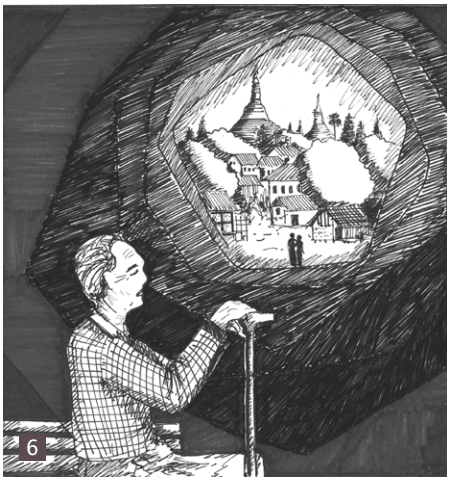
▼ After all this time passed, U Ye Htet's settlement in Shwepyithar received an eviction notice, just like many other communities across the city. He didn't think his family would have to relive this in their old age.





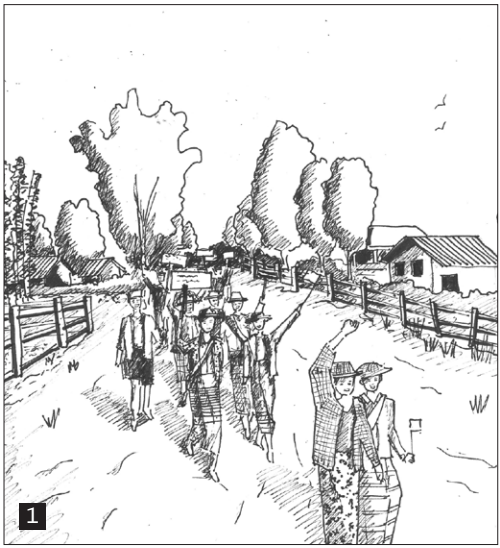
► Another community of people who have played an important role in the city's history has been dissolved like that. The stories they shared at the tea shop will have to wait for a different time.

◄ Feeling powerless against the bulldozers, most of his neighbours started demolishing the houses they had built almost 30 years ago and had upgraded several times since then. If they did so before the machines arrived, at least they could resell some spare parts of their homes.



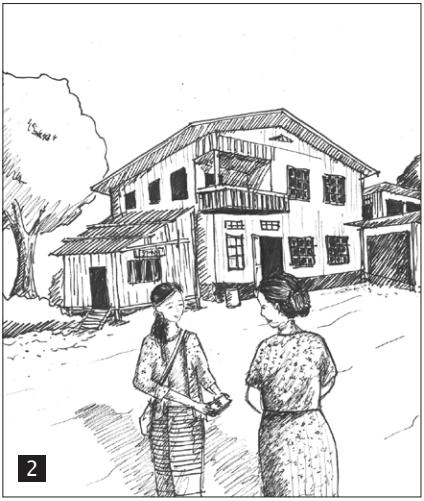
The vicious circle of poverty and informality

By pushing people further into poverty and making them more vulnerable financially, socially, and emotionally, forced evictions are very far from 'resolving' the issue of slum settlements. Even though the advocates of eviction speak of 'clearance operations', informal settlements don't just vanish into thin air, but they merely find new corners to form from scratch. Many examples in Myanmar and beyond have shown that displacement without adequate measures leads to more informal settlements - and eventually more evictions, as their housing condition becomes a vicious circle.



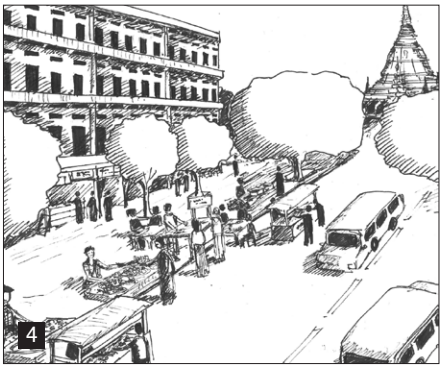
► Along with a few other people from her native town, she reached Hlaingthaya and rented a small room in an informal settlement from a landlord.

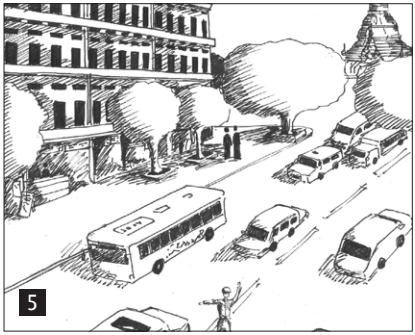
◄ Ma Su moved to Yangon in her early 20s. She had joined anti-government protests in 1988 in her small town, and, even though things eventually calmed down, she no longer felt safe staying there.



▲ Over the next few years, she had to change places a few times: first, the landlord requested the room back; later on, the rent increased, and she could no longer afford to stay in the same area or some new factory development meant she needed to go elsewhere.

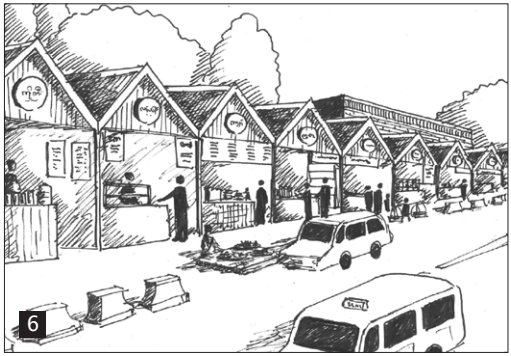
▼ Later, she moved to downtown Yangon and got herself a tiny room in a crowded hostel. She made a living as a street vendor, and things finally looked a little bit more stable for her.

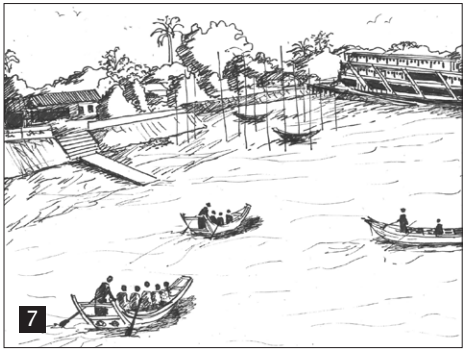




▲ But that didn't last long either. It started as rumours, but eventually, the announcement was made officially: street vendors would be removed from certain parts of the city centre and relocated to a new market on Strand road.

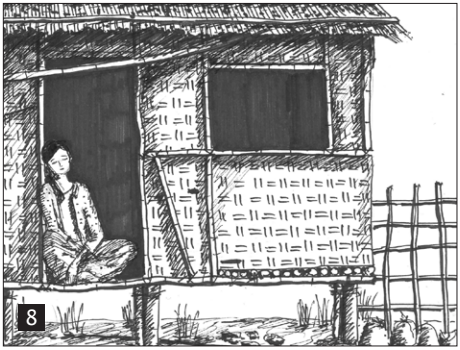
▼ As much as she tried to stay optimistic about the relocation, her income was no longer the same. Fewer clients were walking to the new market, and the busy highway made them feel separated from the neighbouring districts.





▲ With a heavy heart, she decided that she needed to move once again. This time she headed to Dala township, just across the river, and the only place she could afford was a tiny hut in an informal settlement.

▼ With each move, she left a piece of her heart behind; friends, neighbours, opportunities, and dreams that never materialized. Starting over every few years made it impossible to escape poverty and informality.



Police, soldiers forcibly evict more than 1,000 rail workers and their families

(Frontier Myanmar, 2021)

“Authorities plan to clear squatters [...] according to the law”

(from an Eviction Notice)

Long-term settlers in Thanlyin are latest to face military eviction

(DVB, 2021)

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.

(Anonymous, 2021)

‘I never thought gangsters cried’: Hlaing Tharyar locals shaken but defiant

(Frontier Myanmar, 2021)

Squatter struggles and resistance since the coup

A few days after the military coup d'etat, poor dwellers from Yangon's peripheral townships started flooding the city to protest. They were among the first and most persistent protesters and paid a heavy price for it, most memorably on the 14 March crackdown in Hlaingtharya that left more than 70 people dead. Their resistance against the regime has continued since then in many ways - organizing, informing, providing safety to people on the run, channelling aid to often invisible needy communities. Their fear about their fate under the junta would be validated within months. What started as rumours in September 2021 turned into a massive chain of evictions of settlements across different parts of the city. People across Yangon were ordered to demolish their houses or watch bulldozers do it for them if they didn't comply. The military is not only punishing the grassroots people for their resistance; it also grabs the opportunity to clear land and release it to a highly corrupt market from which very few people benefit at the expense of others.

Standing her ground at all costs

During the past decades, many of Yangon's residents were involuntarily resettled and have had to take roots in unfamiliar parts of the city. Experiencing eviction once is already a traumatizing event, followed by many hardships and sacrifices to make a better living. In the course of the most recent wave of evictions, some find themselves unable to go through it all over again and feel like they have no choice but to stand their ground, even as terror and unbearable circumstances surround them.

▲ Daw San San used to live with her family in Insein township. In 1989, they were ordered to resettle in a new area – what would become Hlaingthaya township. At that time, more than 500,000 people were evicted from their neighbourhoods, though she never really understood why.

▼ Although Daw San San didn't know anyone in this new place, this started changing by working together to make a better living for themselves. Like most relocated families, she was allocated a plot on a paddy field without building materials or infrastructures. So they had to start from scratch, digging water wells, opening roads, and organizing their plot boundaries.

▲ At times, they were forced by the authorities to work on building the area's infrastructure. Each family, for example, had to dig a deep trench around their house and even children joined to help, otherwise they would be fined 5,000 Kyats.

▼ Despite many hardships, Daw San San felt that she was becoming part of a new community. She started selling cooked foods and getting some customers. She raised her children and grandchildren, made some good friends, and took roots in Hlaingthaya.

▲ Soon after the coup, peaceful protests sprung up in her neighbourhood. Her son joined the Civil Disobedience Movement and left their home to go into hiding because he knew he would soon be on the junta's target list. Indeed, Daw San San saw her son's name on the list days later.

▲ Since then, security forces have been stationed in front of her house. She feels that she is always being watched. One day, she found a letter at her door, saying that the house would be confiscated if no one was staying there.

▼ When evictions started occurring across the city, her son suggested she move to another township where some friends who could take her in. But she doesn't want to. Not only due to the fear of losing her house but also due to her attachment to her area and community. She is almost 80 and feels like she couldn't handle starting over.

The blurry boundaries between formal & informal

When it comes to how people access land and housing, the boundaries between 'formal' and 'informal' can be quite blurry. In numerous cases, people switch from one to the other - in either direction - due to circumstances that are outside of their control and not because they have taken the 'right' or 'wrong' decision. These moves can be so arbitrary and do not follow simple logic; it can be luck or chance. This should be a reminder to not quickly judge and blame squatters as 'illegal'. The hardships from the coup have intensified such movements and people's insecurity, as Ma Naing's story illustrates.

▲ Ma Naing used to live in a formal part of Hlaingthaya. Her family rented a small extension of another person's house, and most of their income came from her husband's job as a trishaw driver.

▼ When she gave birth to her first child, she had to stay at the hospital for a few days. Upon her return, she found their place collapsed from the heavy rain. The owner did not allow them to rebuild the extension, and with a newborn baby to care for, she quickly decided to move into a slum in the same ward, which became their new home.

◄ When the coup happened, life started becoming even more challenging. Her husband put a red flag on his tricycle as a protest sign and was slapped and kicked by soldiers who promised to keep an eye on him.

▲ A few months later, Ma Naing's husband took on a job on a fishing vessel, hoping to bring home more income and perhaps to avoid similar encounters, she thought. She has not heard from him since.

▼ In the meantime, her financial situation was getting worse. She even struggled to get formula for her baby. She would teach children in the neighbourhood, but since everyone was in a tight spot, she rarely received any fee for that. "Still, this is the right thing to do."

◄ When slum evictions started happening, she thought they would be safe as her house was not on the main road. But on a day in December her house was demolished without any notice. Gangsters and hired thugs were involved in the process, and within a couple of hours, all that was left on the ground were broken bamboo pieces and corrugated iron sheets.

▲ She is already behind with the payments, and the landlord started increasing the pressure, especially when she would receive donations to feed her child. Since she could not pay, she gave some of her clothes to the owners' kids. This gave her peace for a couple of days, but soon the owner started asking for the rent.

▲ Most evicted families had difficulty finding another place. Many house or hostel owners rejected renting out to former squatters. Fortunately, she managed to find a room in the formal part of her ward. On top of the monthly rent of 65,000 Kyat, she had to give a deposit and a rice bag as an in-kind payment.

No one is spared from eviction

It seems that the forced evictions that the junta's soldiers and administrators have been carrying out since 2021 do not spare anyone. Any former tenure agreements are worthless to protect someone, even if their land and housing purchase were made orderly. It doesn't matter who you are, how much you have done for your community, or how well-respected you are among your peers. Only very specific interpersonal connections to a powerful few may be able to secure someone the right to stay in the same spot. Here is the story of a mother whose son is serving in the military and who was evicted by the very institution her son belongs to.

▲ Daw Swe Swe - a humanitarian worker, working for people's health - was very content when she managed to pull together enough money to buy a plot of land in Hlaingthaya. She purchased it directly from the landowner, and they even called witnesses when she signed the contract. Her family slowly build their house there, where they have been staying for more than 20 years.

▼ When cyclone Nargis happened, it destroyed not only people's land and houses but also washed away many of their documents. The purchase certificate was lost, and since the person she had bought the land from passed away a few years later, it became impossible to prove ownership of the plot.

▲ In October 2021, everyone in the township started hearing rumours and later actual news of evictions of many settlements. Daw Swe Swe felt sorry for them, but she never thought she would have to face the same fate. But in late November, she received a call from her son saying, "Mother, they are coming to destroy the house; they are coming with backhoes."

▼ When soldiers arrived in the area, Daw Swe Swe cried in vain, "This is my house, this is my land; I bought it with my own money!" One of the soldiers gave her a stern look and replied, "That's not my problem."

▲ Desperate to be heard, Daw Swe Swe let the soldiers know that her son and brothers were in the army, but that didn't seem to impress the soldiers either. Before they flattened everything to the ground, she dismantled her house and managed to save some of her belongings.

▼ Almost all the money that she had painstakingly saved for her children's education went toward renting a room in a nearby neighbourhood. She couldn't go too far as her children still went to school in that ward.

◄ And, what happened to all the land plots which people were evicted from? Rumour has it that some well-connected individuals make a profit by selling them. Meanwhile, there is no safe spot in the whole city for evicted families like that of Daw Swe Swe.

Resistance from the grassroots people

The revolution that has been sparked since the military coup has activated people from all walks of life, and the poor and working classes play a vital role in the struggles for freedom. Even though they face many limitations, like access to resources and information, urban poor and squatter families from all parts of Yangon have been among the first to fill the streets to protest. And they have been finding ways to show their support and solidarity, even as the military met them with some of the most brutal crackdowns and, later on, with forced evictions. Their role in this revolution needs to be acknowledged and not forgotten, no matter the outcome of the ongoing struggles.

▲ When Ko Thet, a construction worker from Hlaingthaya, heard about the coup in the early morning of February 1st, he felt his blood boiling. This was bad news for everyone, much more for poor squatters like himself.

▼ A few days later, he and dozens of people from his settlement squeezed onto buses and pick-up tracks and headed towards Hledan. Word got out that there would be a protest there, and they wanted to join their voices with everyone else's.

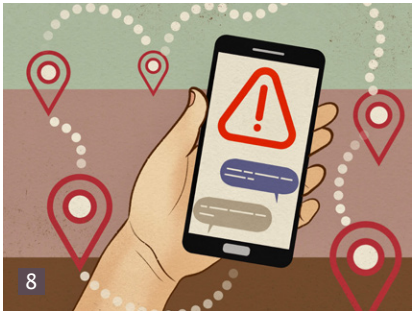
◄ For weeks, they would do the same thing every day; come to the city to protest, sometimes walking all the way to Sule Pagoda in the scorching sun, and hoping to catch a ride once the demonstration was over to return to their settlement.

► When a rumour started spreading about upcoming evictions, everyone was uncertain what to believe. Many assumed this was happening because slum settlements provided some safety to protesters thanks to the anonymity and poor exercise of control by administrators.

◄ Even as protests were no longer a daily routine, Ko Thet's new role was to keep his community up to date about what was happening: he was one of a handful of people with a phone in a settlement of more than 200 families. Rumours were quick to spread, and everyone ran to him to confirm what news was real and what was fake.

◄ Along with some other people from his community, Ko Thet tried to negotiate with the local ward leader about how they could be spared. Their community had so many children, pregnant women, and sick people - what would happen to all of them? Their appeals were not heard, though.

▲ He will never forget the day when police officers and a few armed plain-clothed men arrived in their settlement to hand them an eviction notice. They would have two weeks to leave - if they did not comply, their houses would be bulldozed to the ground. No reason was given to them for that order.



▲ "We need to do something. If we cannot avoid the eviction, at least we can make it known, warn others, and organize support for our people," he said. Taking many risks, Ko Thet used his phone to connect to community organizers, and journalists. He knew he would have to go into hiding after that.

◄ Is there any explanation for this brutal practice of the military to leave thousands of families homeless? Ko Thet shares his perspective, "They want to punish people like us. They certainly don't like that we resist, and that we protest, and that we don't accept their rule."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