

2025

Myanmar Earthquake Reporting Diary



MOHINGA
MATTERS

28th March, Yangon

I was resting in bed, struggling with neck pain, while my wife prepared lunch. Suddenly, I heard our dog barking excitedly. Then, I felt a strong tremor shook my bed. As I tried to sit up, my wife yelled, “Earthquake! Earthquake!”

I rushed to the balcony, filmed a few clips of residents running outside, and sent them to my office, my hands still trembling. Then, I focused on calming my wife down. She went downstairs as I checked the Yangon-Thanyin Bridge on the balcony. It was still standing tall. Next, I called my parents to make sure they were safe. By then, the mobile network had crashed, and we could only communicate through Wi-Fi.

Concerned about the quake’s impact in

Yangon, I reached out to friends and scoured social media for updates. Searching for “earthquake” in Myanmar language, I found reports from citizen journalists describing significant tremors across the country. The devastation in Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw shocked me. For hours, I relayed updates to my office. After assessing the situation, we decided Mandalay would be the best location for on-site coverage.

When I called to book a flight, Nay Pyi Taw and Mandalay airports were shut down due to extensive earthquake damage. I learned that the air traffic control tower in Nay Pyi Taw had collapsed, killing everyone inside. With no flights available, driving was my only option to go to Mandalay.

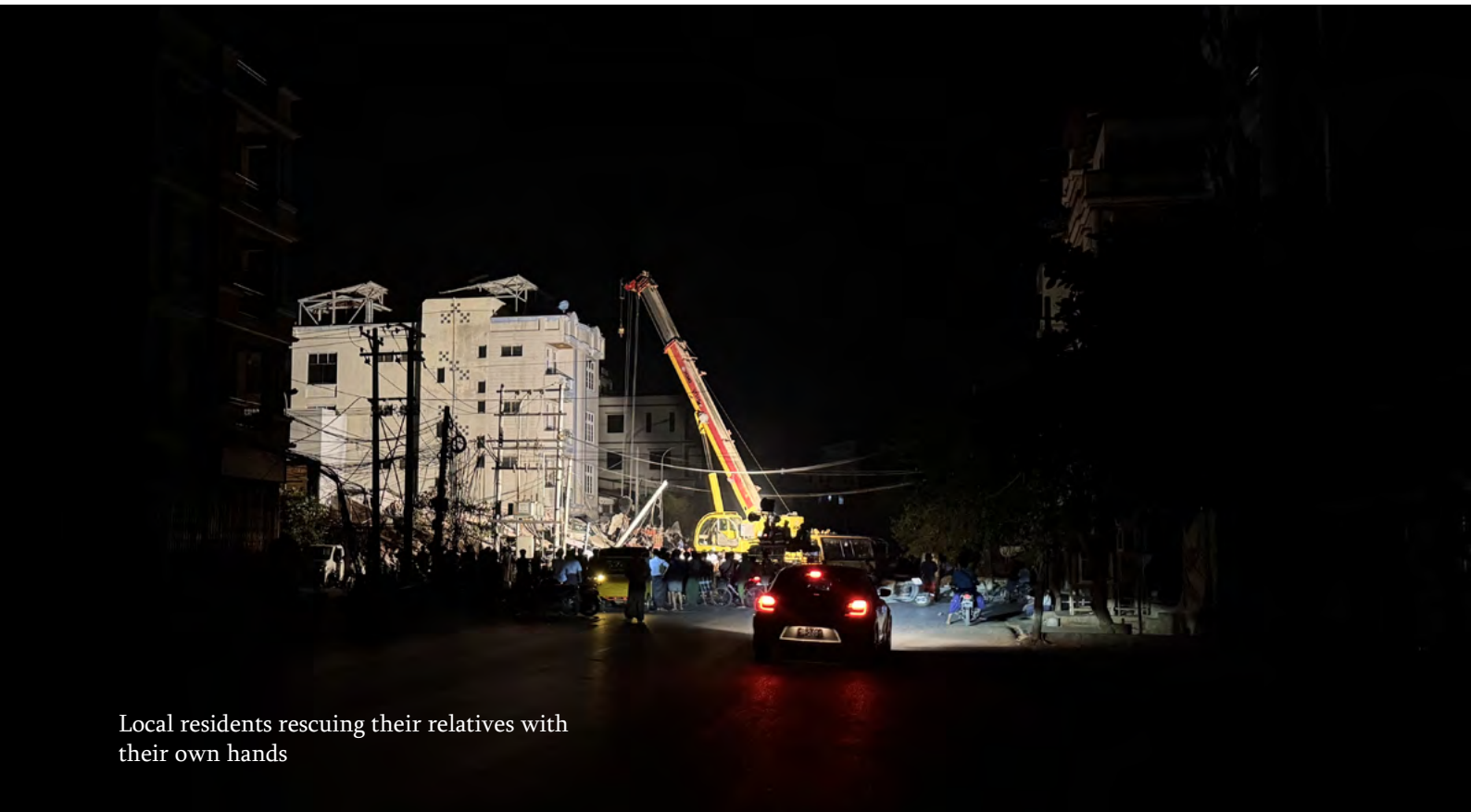


Our team, including four journalists (my wife and three of my colleagues) and my friend, set off for Mandalay. At the toll plaza on Yangon's outskirts, staff informed us that the highway was safe up to around mile 130 but warned that we'd have to switch to the old Yangon-Mandalay road beyond that. We followed the highway, stopping for breakfast at a rest camp at mile 39 before continuing to mile 115 to refuel. Up to that point, the journey had been smooth, but beyond mile 115, we encountered significant earthquake damages. Bridges showed structural issues, sections of the highway were cracked or lifted, and some roads had sharp, uneven terrain. With no official hazard signs, locals had improvised warnings such as branches being placed on the road to indicate unusable sections. At mile 138, the highway was completely closed, forcing us to take the old highway road.

Near Kyauk Se, a city 25-mile south of Mandalay, we hit a long queue of stalled trucks and cars. Uncertain of what was happening, we stepped out to check the situation. My friend found an alternate route, allowing us to bypass the queue until

an armed policeman stopped us. I feared he might question us, especially since revealing that we were journalists on an earthquake assignment could be risky. As he approached, my friend rolled down his window, greeted him, and casually offered a bottle of purified water. This simple act eased the tension, and we were allowed to cross a damaged bridge without any incident.

By 6pm, we finally arrived in Mandalay. Our initial plan was to head straight to Sky Villa condominium, which had collapsed during the quake, trapping many victims. However, as we entered the city, we noticed social workers preparing stretchers near a collapsed building. We decided to stop and gather information. The building, housing a three-story beer station and a karaoke pub, had crumbled, trapping a mother and her two-year-old son in the kitchen. Despite over 17 hours of rescue efforts, they remained unrecovered due to the overwhelming wreckage and lack of proper equipment. Some believed they had perished while others held onto hope.

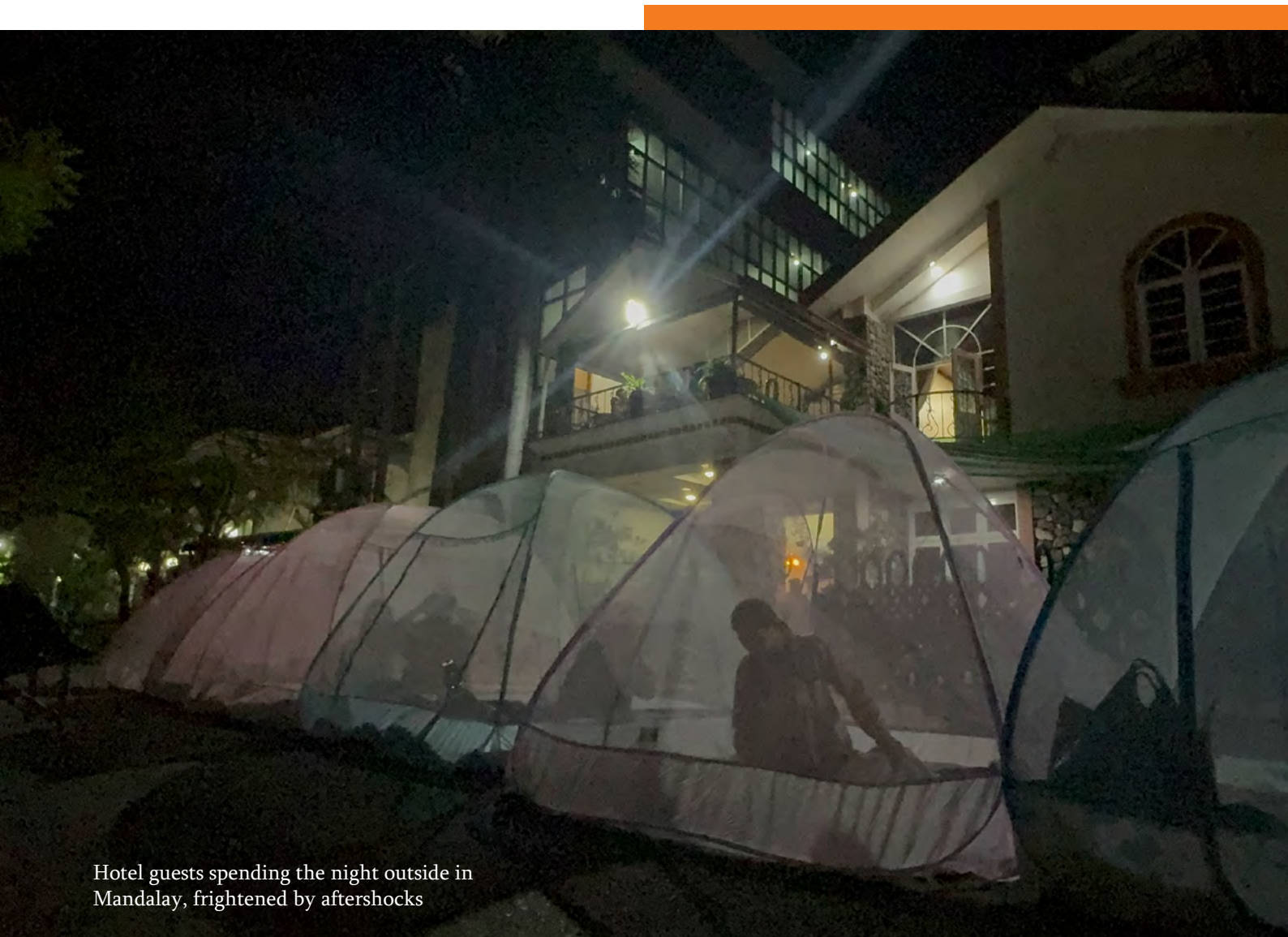


Local residents rescuing their relatives with their own hands

After gathering a few interview bits at the building, we continued our journey to the Sky Villa. Without internet access or reliable navigation, driving through the pitch-black city was stressful especially when we were not locals and unfamiliar with the roads, but we eventually found it. Soldiers guarded the wreckage and blocked entry, so we chose not to confront them and instead headed to a restaurant for dinner.

Later, my friend's colleague joined us and guided us around the devastated city. We saw countless people camped out on streets, too afraid to return to their damaged homes. Some buildings looked intact but were surrounded by collapsed structures, raising fears of further collapses. Many residents, traumatized by the strongest quake of their lives, refused to sleep indoors. At one intersection, we spotted a crowd frantically digging through the rubble of a collapsed building. A Muslim family was trapped inside, and desperate locals worked tirelessly to free them. When I approached the family members for an interview, they politely declined.

At around 10pm, we checked into our hotel. The humidity was unbearable, and the accommodations were cramped, but exhaustion overtook discomfort. Suddenly, violent knocking woke us up. My wife was trembling, and my colleagues, still in their pajamas, hurried to see what was happening. A hotel bellboy urged us to evacuate and claimed that "another tremor will hit in half an hour." I asked where he got this information, and he replied, "We received a call." I knew for a fact that earthquakes couldn't be predicted as such. My colleagues reacted with mixed emotions: frustration at being woken so aggressively but sympathy for the survivors who are now terrified of aftershocks. They opted to return to sleep as I stepped outside to assess the situation. Almost everyone in the hotel was outside, sitting on the ground. I filmed a few videos and returned to my room. The next morning, I learned that most guests remained outside until 5am and only returned indoors at first light.



Hotel guests spending the night outside in Mandalay, frightened by aftershocks



Wreckage of Mahar Myat Muni Pagoda being cleared to make way for repairs

We set out to document Mandalay's most significant landmarks, starting with the Maha Myat Muni Buddha image, one of the holiest Buddhist sites in the city. The temple had suffered damage, and as we arrived, an excavator was clearing debris from a collapsed aisle. We captured videos and images before exploring further. At the temple's fish ponds, I was shocked to see countless dead fishes being recovered by volunteers. The stench was overwhelming and everyone was encouraged to wear masks. Many were puzzled by the mass deaths. The plausible explanation was that earthquakes could release toxic gases from underground, potentially intoxicating fishes in the pond. Before we could investigate further, police rushed in and ordered us to leave. Later, we found out a high-ranking military officer had just arrived to inspect the damage.

As we continued documenting, we came across a five-story residential building dangerously tilted, its residents cautiously entering to retrieve what remained of their belongings. Filming the scene, it got me thinking that their priority shifted to salvaging their possessions after having survived the quake. If I were in their shoes, I would have done the same.

One of my colleagues suggested heading to Zay Cho Market to film the collapsed ancient clock

tower. I had seen online reports of a clock tower collapsing and stopping precisely at the time of the earthquake although I wasn't sure which one or where it was. If it were Zay Cho's clock tower, as my colleague believed, it would make a compelling story. Trusting his instinct, we drove towards the market, where many old and closely packed buildings had suffered extensive damage.

As we neared the supposed location, my colleague excitedly assured us the clock tower was just around the corner. But when we turned the corner, the sight surprised us. The tower stood untouched, still functioning. Frustrated, we scolded our colleague for leading us to a false chase though he was just as shocked. Later, we learned that the actual collapsed clock belonged to Masoeyein Monastery, not Zay Cho. Despite not getting the footage we wanted, I felt relieved that a historic site had survived for future generations to see.

A tremor struck while we were waiting for our lunch, sending people running to open areas in panic. We were inside a small wooden hut of a restaurant so we didn't feel the immediate danger. The kitchen staff, however, were too shaken to return to work, delaying our meal by nearly two hours.



The wreckage of Sky Villa following the earthquake

After lunch, we headed to the infamous Sky Villa wreckage site. The sheer scale of destruction was biblical; massive piles of concrete lay scattered while volunteers desperately tried to communicate with people who were still trapped beneath the rubble.

Families of the victims clung to fragile hope, waiting for any sign of life. Among the rescuers was a Chinese team working alongside local volunteers. They had just found an unidentified woman alive in the wreckage.

That was when I saw a stark contrast between determination and technical expertise. The Myanmar rescuers were driven by sheer willpower, refusing to waste a single moment. To them, survival was a race against time, and they were willing to risk everything to save the trapped victims. The Chinese team, on the other hand, approached the rescue with professional precision as they carefully balanced urgency with calculated caution. When the aftershock struck earlier, the Chinese team paused to reassess the situation while the Myanmar volunteers and families continued digging.



A Chinese rescue team in action as Myanmar firefighters observe



Sky Villa wreckage site at night

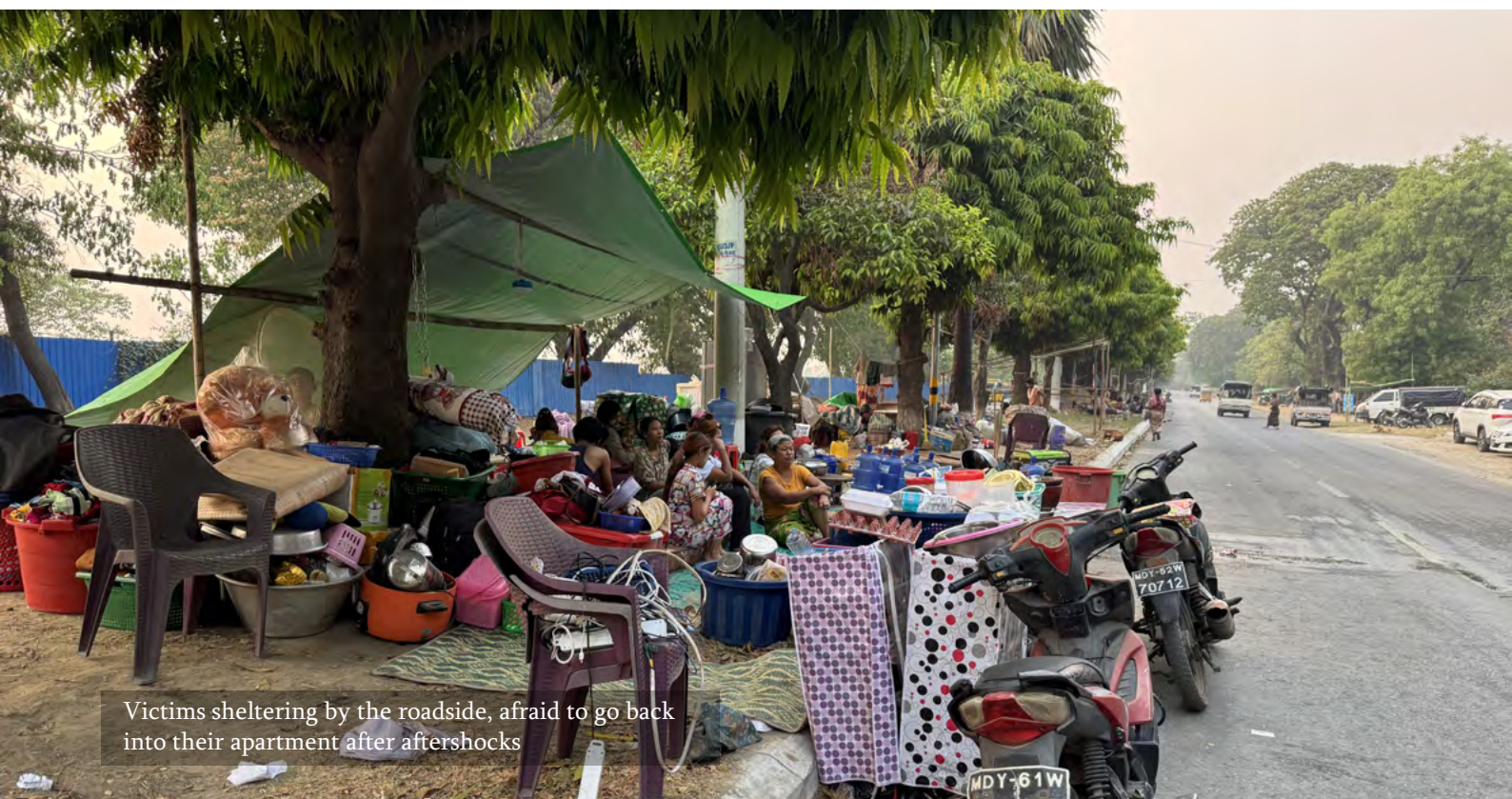
Excitement surged when rescuers received confirmation that the trapped woman had seen their flashlight; a sign that she was still conscious and reachable. Emotions ran high and hope filled the air. The Chinese rescue team then proposed a new strategy which was to climb to the top of the rubble, drill a small hole, and insert a camera to assess the victim's condition before proceeding. This delay frustrated the Myanmar team and the victim's relatives, who were desperate to keep digging. Although they didn't openly oppose the idea, their silent expressions spoke volumes.

Later, I discovered that the trapped woman was believed to be the owner of a well-known jewelry shop in Mandalay. But when the woman was finally pulled out of the wreckage, the survivor was identified as her maid. The billionaire had perished when the building collapsed.

With our reporting materials gathered, we called it a day and returned to the hotel to work on our coverage.



Young helpers look on as night falls



Victims sheltering by the roadside, afraid to go back into their apartment after aftershocks

We went to inspect another wreckage site: the Great Wall Hotel, where many were believed to be trapped. Shortly after our arrival, a different Chinese rescue team arrived with a K9 police dog unit. A desperate woman rushed towards them, pleading to search for her husband and two young daughters as she was convinced that they were still alive under the rubbles. However, rescue efforts were stalled due to the hotel's dangerously tilted structure, which could collapse at any moment and potentially endanger both volunteers and rescuers. Despite being told about the risks, the mother refused to accept their hesitation. She begged every team she encountered to continue the search. In an emotional interview, she turned to the camera and said, "Hang in there, my babies. Mom is doing everything in her power to get you back." Her youngest was only two years old; it was heartbreaking.

I hurried to find an internet connection to publish my latest report. Meanwhile, my colleagues at the office waited with unsettling news. Rumors were spreading that a Myanmar military intelligence officer was hunting down foreign journalists reporting on the earthquake. Without hesitation, I decided to leave Mandalay immediately.

My initial plan was to spend the night in Kyauk Se, assess the situation from there, and return to Mandalay if things seemed safe by the morning. I naively assumed the town would have suffered less damage since it was not as close to the epicenter in Sagaing. However, upon arrival in Kyauk Se, I was shocked to find out that the town was severely affected. We searched for lodging but found that most hotels closed due to structural damage. One small hotel was still operating, packed with guests, and they offered us a room on the second floor. Yet, after assessing the hotel's condition, we deemed it unsafe since the damaged stairwell made it too risky.

As we toured the city, we saw more evidence of destruction. Despite being the hometown of former dictator Than Shwe, the town seemed abandoned in its suffering. I spotted an army major with a group of soldiers supervising body recovery efforts at one site, but beyond that, residents were largely left to fend for themselves without much aid. With no better option, we decided to return to Mandalay and check into the same hotel again. Fortunately, electricity had been restored, and the air conditioning was working: a small comfort in the midst of devastation.

Fellow journalists informed us that a Russian team was setting up a field hospital in Mandalay to treat earthquake victims. We went there to film and interview. While we were recording, a team member approached us and inspected who we were and why we were filming. My colleagues explained that we were an international media team documenting Russia's aid efforts.

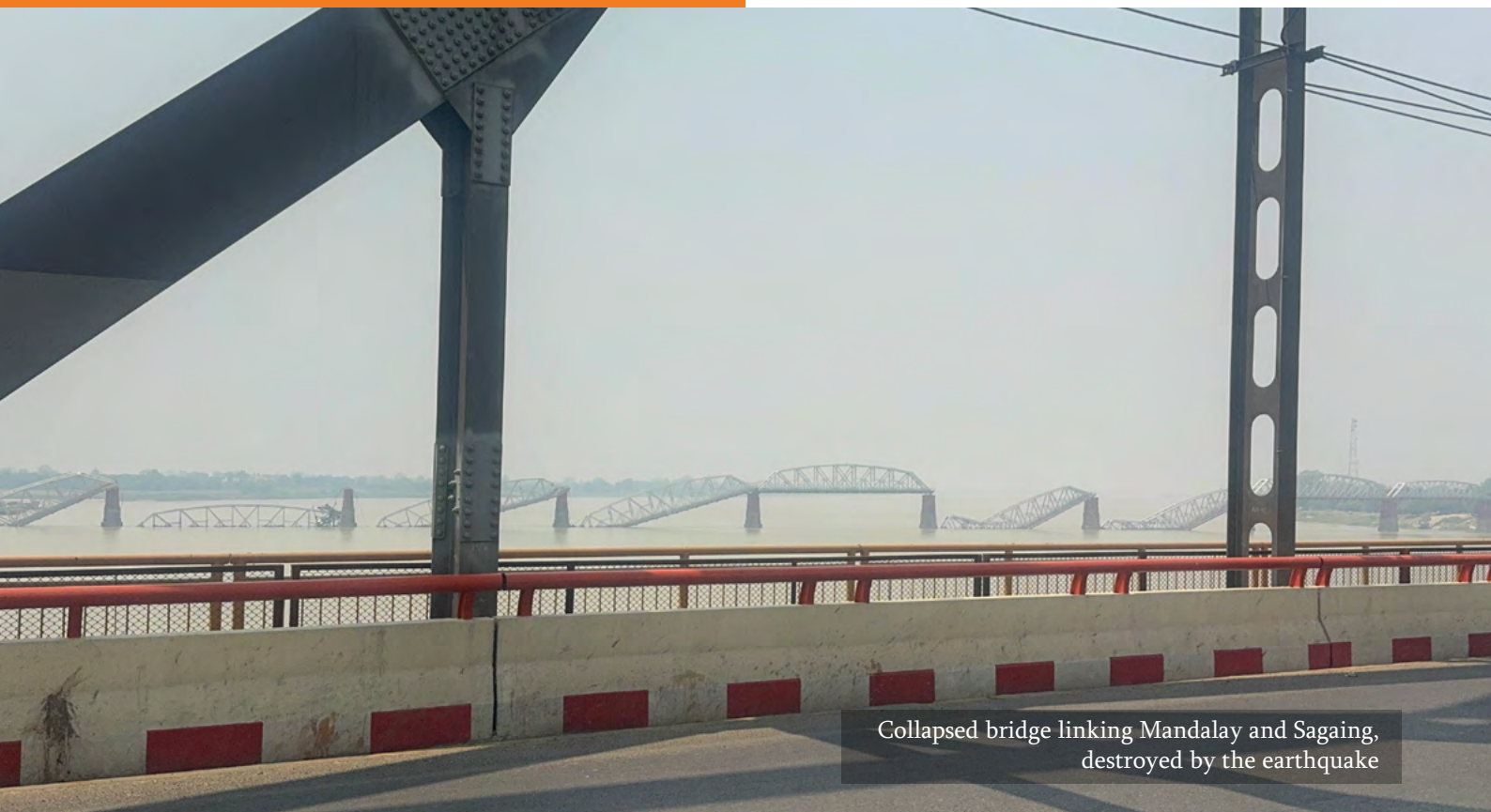
As we were about to leave the mobile hospital after wrapping up the filming, a Myanmar national rushed towards us and asked who we were. My colleagues engaged him in conversation, but I wanted to leave. I was certain he was a military intelligence personnel in plainclothes. Looking for an excuse to get away, I noticed smoke rising in the distance near the clinic. Seizing the opportunity, I pointed to it and said, "There's a fire." As attention shifted to the smoke, we quickly left. Thankfully, it was a small fire and didn't harm those already suffering from the quake.

We continued filming along the ancient moat of Mandalay, documenting the destruction of the walled palace grounds and tended to go back to our hotel after that.

Unfamiliar with the roads and without internet access, we got lost on the way back. It took over an hour to reach not our hotel, but to Amarapura Township, about a 20-minute drive away from Mandalay. There, we saw residents abandoning their homes, taking shelter in makeshift huts along the roads.

We stopped to document their lives: people too afraid to stay indoors, choosing to live on the streets instead. When donors arrived, victims rushed for food and water in a chaotic scramble. I asked my wife to help with an interview at a hut where only women were staying. Later, an older woman from a nearby hut told me they were escorts from a karaoke bar. But to me, it didn't matter whether someone was rich, poor, religious, or atheist; everyone suffered equally in this disaster. Even the holiest pagodas and Buddha statues had not been spared.

While interviewing, we suddenly felt an aftershock. It was the first time I personally experienced the violent shake that victims had described. I even heard the deep rumbling sound and, for the first time, felt genuine fear. We quickly wrapped up and returned to Mandalay.



Collapsed bridge linking Mandalay and Sagaing, destroyed by the earthquake

2nd April, Sagaing

Early this morning, I received a call from a donation group we had joined the day before, confirming they were ready to head to Sagaing. Since I already had permission from my office to cover the situation there, I canceled my other assignments in Mandalay and joined the goodwill team. I was eager to go.

Anyar, a term referred to the central region in Myanmar, had long been associated with the military. Historically, this region supplied many Myanmar soldiers. But during the spring revolution, the people of *Anyar* made a bold choice and stood with the people instead of the military. For four years, they have endured atrocious attacks carried out by the military and now, an earthquake which was another cruel blow to them.

As we traveled to Sagaing, I saw how the entire country recognized the sacrifices of the people of *Anyar* and showed appreciation by offering aid. Once again, it was civilians, not the regime, who responded first. Despite rumors, misinformation, and the risk posed by uniformed soldiers, social workers and donors poured into the region. The donation group I travelled with carried purified water, tarpaulins, dried noodles, and sanitary pads for women. What a thoughtful gesture!



Volunteers providing support to those affected by the quake in Sagaing

At the foot of the bridge that linked Mandalay to Sagaing, we encountered large groups of police inspecting the long lines of donation convoys. When we crossed, I saw the old bridge, now collapsed because of the quake. This was not its first destruction for it had been detonated during World War II by retreating British forces to delay the Japanese advance into India. After the Independence, it was rebuilt but only to be damaged again.

Before entering Sagaing, we were stopped at a police checkpoint to register our names, vehicles, and donation items. Even during a humanitarian crisis, the junta's priority was restricting aid to the resistance. At the city's entrance, soldiers, police, militias, and public security personnel crowded the streets. Sagaing was in ruins: traffic was unbearable, and buildings on either side had collapsed. While Mandalay had high-rise buildings, Sagaing did not, yet every structure had been damaged, from houses to huts. Even the fire station had crumbled, trapping fire engines beneath the wreckage. Yet, uniformed personnel stood by, not involved in any search and rescue effort, merely watching donors with suspicion.



Young monks heading out in search of provisions

Inside Sagaing, I saw its distinct culture with monks, nuns, monasteries and nunneries at every corner. The streets were filled with people in red and yellow robes in hopes to collect supplies. The scene was chaotic as victims rushed for whatever they could get while donors tried to distribute aid fairly. Groups of children, novices, monks, and nuns ran back and forth whenever a truck passed.

Our group visited nunneries and donated supplies. I hadn't considered before that nuns, as women, had specific needs often overlooked. They were deeply grateful for the sanitary pads, which were scarce since shops had run out, making it nearly impossible to find them. Many victims praised the donation team for their thoughtful preparations.

I tried to reach a Malaysian rescue team working on search and recovery efforts but couldn't get through due to the intense security. Later, a local woman offered to guide me to the broken bridge. She was knowledgeable, so I decided to

interview her. On the way back, she pointed to a modest house and said, "That belongs to Min Aung Hlaing. It was damaged too." That got us thinking about why he would own a property in Sagaing. We then joked about his possible ties in Sagaing.

When we discussed Sagaing being partly controlled by the People's Defense Forces (PDF), the woman casually mentioned, "I'm fine dealing with both sides even though my cousin is a colonel in Nay Pyi Taw military headquarters." That surprised me.

I had been careful about keeping my identity discreet. Yet here I was, speaking with someone connected to the military's inner circle. Initially, I was wary but the more I observed her, the less I worried. Her focus was purely on humanitarian aid, not politics. Despite a little bit of mistrust between the goodwill volunteers, we went back to Mandalay safe and sound.



Soldiers stand by the collapsed moat in Mandalay, a result of the earthquake

3rd April, Sagaing

Back in Mandalay, I headed to 31st Street, where victims had set up temporary shelters along the ancient moat. On the way, I saw firefighters preparing to recover a dead body from the wreckage of a Karaweik restaurant. I stopped, waited, and filmed the rescue operation which was a joint effort between Chinese and Myanmar teams. The firefighters looked exhausted, probably overwhelmed by the sheer number of tasks they had been assigned.

Before the armed resistance began, the military was involved in disaster response. Now, with significant troop losses on battlefields, it was clear they could no longer engage in humanitarian operations. Instead, the regime's Fire Service Department, social workers, and civilian-led charity groups had taken full responsibility for search and rescue efforts.

After documenting the recovery, I reflected on what I had always been taught to do during

an earthquake: take cover, duck, and stay put until it is safe. But in Myanmar, my experience told me otherwise. Here, those who survived were the ones who ran outside when they had the chance. Many who lost their lives had followed the standard guidance, stayed under cover and waited for rescue.

The reality is that in this country, even if you survive the initial disaster, there is no advanced technology or equipment to recover you quickly. I saw a post on social media that read, "We have every piece of equipment to kill people, but zero equipment to save lives." That summed up the grim truth. The survival strategies taught in textbooks work in countries with proper rescue operations. But here, my advice is different: forget the textbooks, save yourself however you can. You cannot rely on the current regime. They are too busy taking lives while the nation faces its worst natural disaster.



Firefighters responding to the earthquake damage in Mandalay



We continued to 31st Street, where many victims had sought refuge along the moat. There, I met a Rohingya family who had already suffered through Cyclone Mocha in 2023. The father had lost his pregnant wife and eight-year-old son in the cyclone. When I asked for an interview, he declined and said that recalling the past would only put him at a greater risk. However, he allowed his 13-year-old son to speak to us.

The boy had lost his mother and brother when he was just 11. Now, only two years later, another disaster has struck. He told me that on the

day of the earthquake, he prayed at the mosque, asking Allah to take him to heaven if he died so that he could be reunited with his mother. As a human being, I felt deep sorrow for him. As a journalist, I knew his family's tragedy was a powerful story, one that reflected the harsh realities of the Rohingya community.

That night, we slept in an open field, afraid of aftershocks. No bed, no cushion, no proper utilities. Yet, I slept like a child as if I was free from worry.

I woke up on the street and it was still early. We decided to return to our room and take a nap. I noticed something was wrong as if I kept feeling tremors and the ground was shaking beneath me. Half-asleep, I had a strange sensation of being pulled down, and it happened repeatedly. Every time I felt it, I warned my wife, "Earthquake! Let's move out!" But after the fourth or fifth time, she was frustrated, telling me I was imagining it.

I didn't understand what was happening, so I decided to wake up and check social media while waiting for my wife to rise. That's when I noticed cracks on the upper walls of our room. I couldn't ignore them so I woke my wife up, showed her the damage, and we both agreed to start our day. We had breakfast, and like the previous day, we roamed around the city, hoping to find interesting story angles for our coverage. Unfortunately, we found none so we filed our earlier story and sent it to the office over lunch.

The day felt unproductive so we decided to visit a night market in the evening. My friend who travelled with us from Yangon called and invited us to a restaurant so we went. As we were conversing, I felt something unexpected: a cool breeze, followed by a raindrop. Immediately, I shouted, "Rain! It's raining!" Everyone at the restaurant turned to me, confused. My wife, embarrassed, hushed me. So, I kept quiet but was waiting for a chance to prove I was right.

Twenty minutes later, the rain arrived but by then, no one had time to acknowledge that I had been right. The wind grew fierce, sending objects flying in every direction. Judging its intensity, I knew I had to cover this storm. I rushed to the area where I had previously documented victims living in makeshift tents along the ancient moat, including the Rohingya family I had interviewed.



Strong wind demolish victims' huts in Mandalay



Strong wind demolish victims' huts in Mandalay

We struggled to drive through the storm, stopping twice due to strong wind and heavy rain. By the time we reached the site, everything had been destroyed. The victims, who had barely salvaged their belongings from the earthquake eight days earlier, were now forced to gather what little remained after the storm. They weren't here for leisure; they had nowhere else to go. And now, their tents were gone. Where would they sleep tonight?

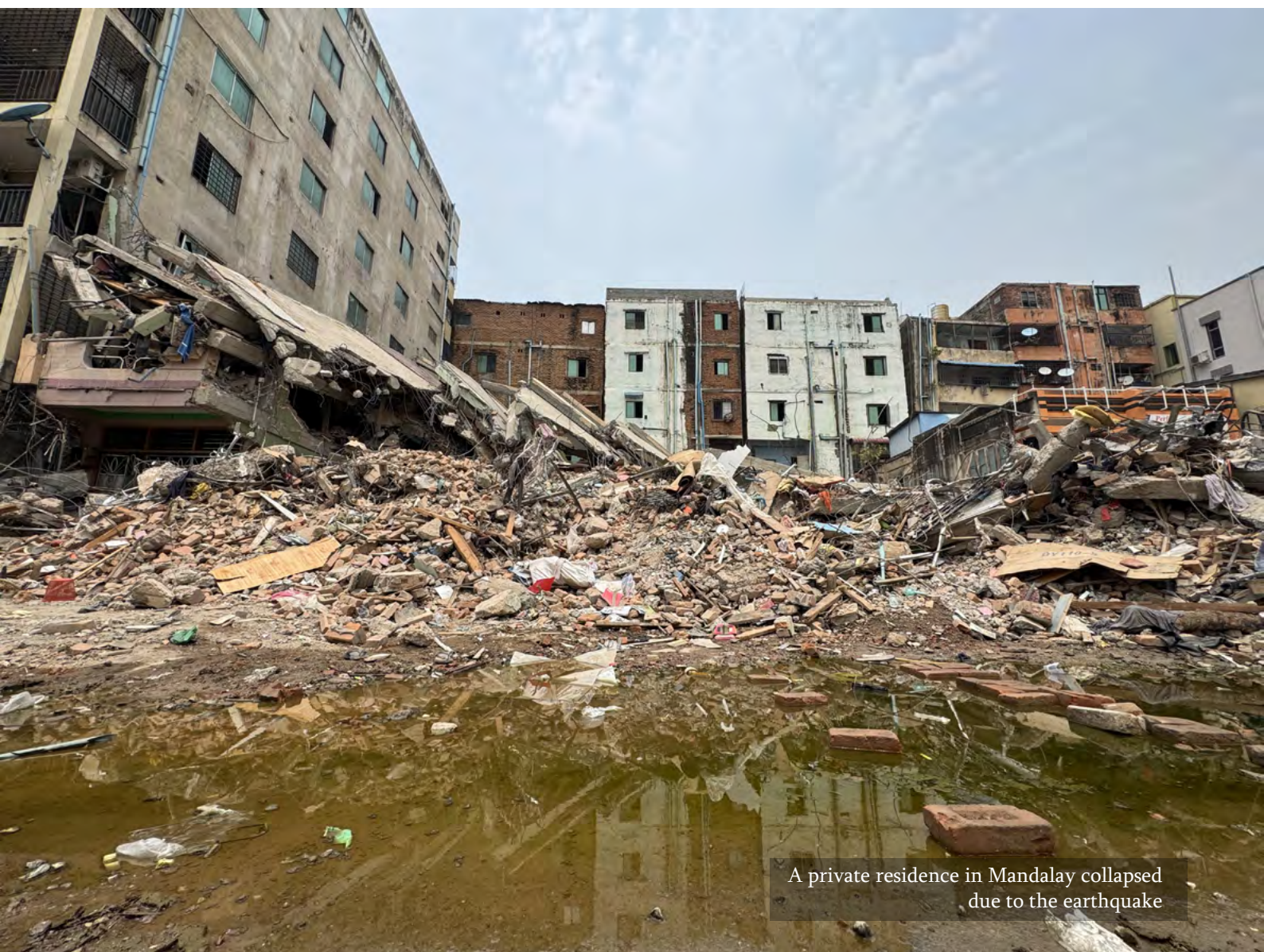
The main street that was once filled with thousands of temporary shelters, was now deserted. I had hoped to follow up on the Rohingya family,

but not only were they missing, everyone had vanished. Mother Nature had been so cruel to them yet again.

When I returned to the hotel, I didn't feel well. The rain prevented us from sleeping outside in our tent, forcing us back into our hotel room. That was when my thoughts spiraled. What if the rain had weakened the soil under our hotel? What if the building collapsed? What if another after-shock hit? The scenarios played over and over in my mind.



Leftover belongings of earthquake victims gathered



The rain continued to pour heavily in the morning. My priority was to check on the street where shelters had been destroyed by the storm. When we left our hotel, I noticed armed soldiers stationed at a corner near our hotel building. I was surprised because this was the first time I had seen them patrolling the streets. Before this, they had been focused on providing security for high-ranking officers at sites like the wreckage of Sky Villa.

I headed towards the area I had visited the previous night after the thunderstorm. When I arrived, everything looked completely different. The road, once crowded with makeshift shelters, was now cleared. Large groups of military personnel were actively cleaning the area. Naively, I thought

they were preparing to rebuild what had been destroyed. But as I observed, I realized that the storm had worked in their favor. Instead of forcibly removing the shelters in front of international rescue teams, nature had done the job for them. I imagined the junta chief feeling relieved, silently thanking the weather for clearing the streets without his command.

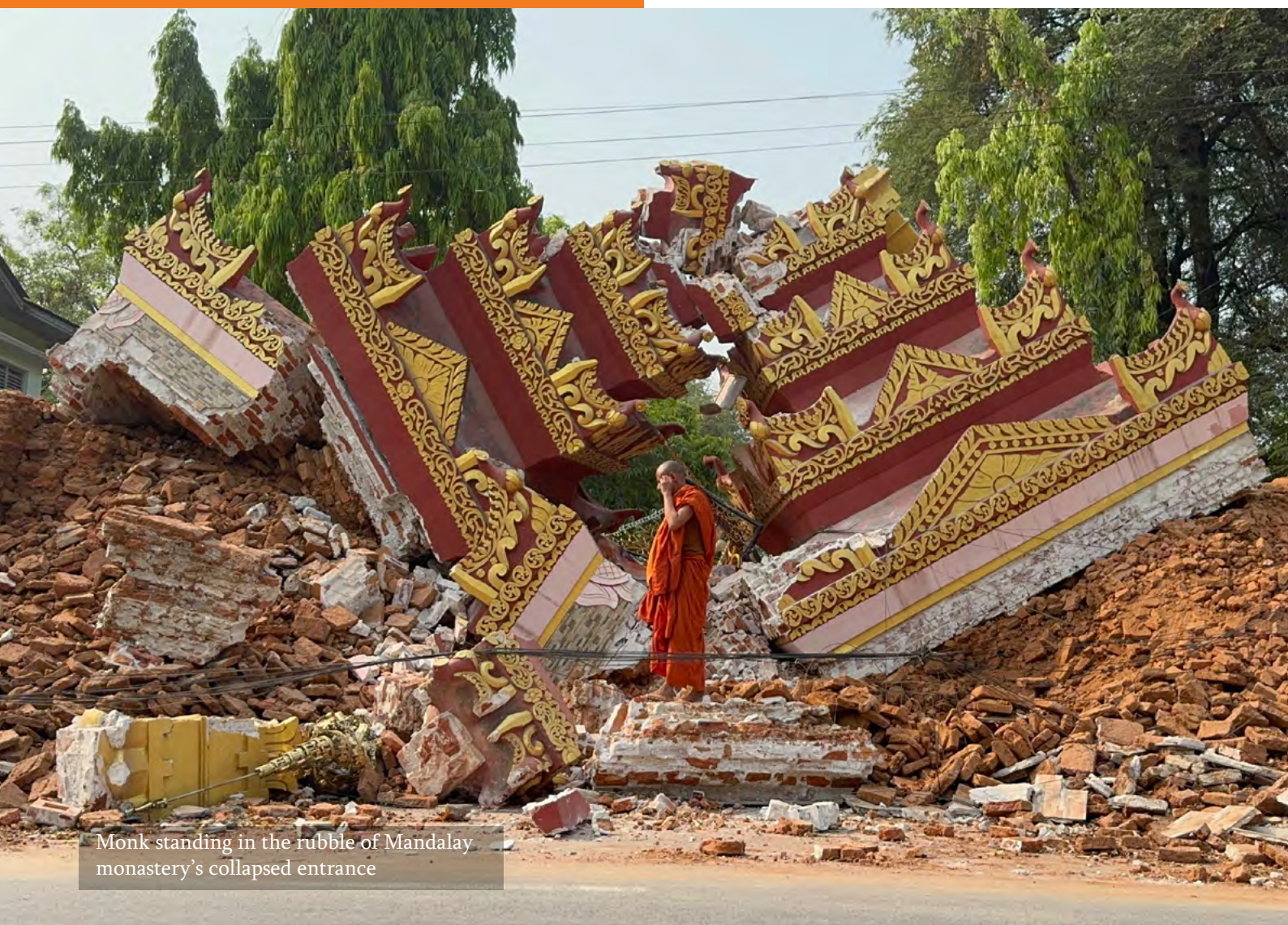
My office was eager for story updates after the storm, but I couldn't find any interesting leads. Meanwhile, military forces seemed to be everywhere, maintaining strict control over the town since the earthquake hit. When I reported the situation, my supervisors decided to pull me out of Mandalay, fearing that my presence could become a risk. They instructed me to wrap up everything and conclude my coverage of the earthquake in central Myanmar.

For the final round, I toured the ancient moat, where soldiers were clearing debris from Mandalay's palace ruins. It looked as if the military had completely taken over the city. However, that evening, regime-controlled media reported that

junta chief Min Aung Hlaing had visited and inspected Mandalay and Sagaing. The very next day, I noticed a sharp decline in military personnel across the region.

This confirmed what I had already known all my life: the Myanmar military does not serve its citizens, only its generals. As soldiers disappeared from the disaster-hit areas, my coverage of the earthquake came to an end. Although news coverage about the earthquake has lessened, the damage and trauma remain, and survival continues. The people who had endured the worst natural disaster in recent memory continue to fight for survival, their resilience unshaken, pushing forward despite it all.

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Monk standing in the rubble of Mandalay monastery's collapsed entrance

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