



BURMA REPORT

September 2007

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Issue N° 51

Associated Press - September 22, 2007

Monk says detained Myanmar opposition leader Suu Kyi looks 'fit and well'

THE BURMANET NEWS -September 22, 2007 Issue # 3298 - "Editor" <editor@burmanet.org> - www.burmanet.org

Detained Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi looked "fit and well" to a group of protesting Buddhist monks who were allowed through a police roadblock to walk past her home Saturday, one of the monks said.

Suu Kyi came out to her gate to pay respect, the monk in a speech to other anti-government protesters at a pagoda afterward. Other witnesses, who asked not to be named due to fear of reprisals, confirmed his account.

Suu Kyi has been under detention continuously since May 2003 at her home in Myanmar's biggest city, Yangon.

The action came as thousands of monks and citizens carried on anti-government protest marches in Yangon, where Suu Kyi is under house arrest, and other cities in Myanmar

The part of University Avenue where Suu Kyi's house is located has been closed to traffic since Sept. 17.

AFP - Saturday September 15, 2007 -

Suu Kyi's party calls for dialogue with Myanmar junta -

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YANGON (AFP) - Myanmar's pro-democracy party on Friday called for dialogue with the ruling military junta after a string of rare protests led to a government crackdown and the arrest of dozens of its members.

The statement by the National League for Democracy, led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, comes after the junta on Sunday threatened action against democracy activists and accused the party of inciting national unrest.

"The expectations of the people, who hope for a change here, will survive if we cooperate by quickly building national reconciliation after holding dialogue," the NLD said in a statement.

The party also denied it was the driving force behind recent protests, sparked by a surprise hike in fuel prices on August 15.

"These demonstrations occurred because the authorities were unable to reach a peaceful resolution, as proposed by the NLD," the group said.

Opposition party members have in the past urged the junta to enter into a dialogue with them to address social and economic hardships in Myanmar, which has been ruled by the military since 1962.

Amnesty International estimates that up to 150 people have been rounded up in the crackdown since the start of the rallies, the largest in Myanmar in nearly a decade.

The crackdown on dissent has led to an international outcry, with US President George W. Bush labelling the junta "tyrannical" and the United Nations human rights chief calling for the release of all peaceful protesters.

Since Sunday's warning from the junta, which was published in state-run media, dozens of NLD members and other social activists have had their mobile phone signals cut.

A party spokesman told AFP on Friday that the landline to the NLD's Yangon headquarters was also apparently disconnected.

Telecommunications sources have said that more than 50 phone services -- mostly mobile phones used by NLD members and other activists -- have been cut to try to curb the spread of information about rallies.

The NLD won elections in 1990, but the military did not recognise the result and has kept Aung San Suu Kyi locked in her lakeside home for extended periods of time, despite fierce international criticism.

<http://au.news.yahoo.com/070914/19/14fiw.html>

A Statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission – 10.09.2007 - AHRC <listadmin@ahrchk.net>

BURMA: Courts shut down because of protests

The Asian Human Rights Commission has been informed that courts in Burma's largest city, Rangoon, have stopped operating.

As has been widely reported, protests began in Burma after an increase in fuel prices of two to five times on August 15. Since August 20, all cases going to the ordinary courts around the city have been repeatedly adjourned; lawyers and others asking about the reason have been told that it is because of security. Evidently, the same does not apply to special tribunals inside the prisons, as on September 7 a group of six men were given jail terms of 20 to 28 years for organising a discussion about workers' rights last May.

What are the consequences of suspending hearings? Obviously, persons are still being arrested for ordinary crimes and misdemeanours. Now, instead of them having their cases heard according to the ordinary criminal procedure, they are being kept in custody for an undefined period of time. This is likely to cause a heavy backlog will take some time for the courts to clear. Additionally, it will lead to many other practical problems. In particular, where are the accused being held? Police cells are likely to become quickly overcrowded, as these are places that can only house small numbers for short periods. And as the police in Burma are known to kill and torture people in their custody with impunity under normal circumstances, overcrowding and postponed hearings will open the door to many more violent incidents in these and coming days.

It is well known that hundreds of protestors held since August 21 have been both taken and detained without any regard to either domestic or international law. Most have been snatched and dragged off the streets by government-organised gangs and members of the police, local councils and other security personnel wearing plain clothes. Some have been held at special interrogation centres; the locations of others remain unknown.

What has not become known is that one of the consequences of their arrests is that a person taken into custody in Rangoon today for any offence at all knows not when he or she may appear before a court or be released. There is also no way for anyone to complain about this state of affairs. In the absence of the courts, which are anyhow already under the complete control of the central authorities, there is nowhere to turn in Burma for any one to obtain a release order if held contrary to the law. Not only the rights of persons detained for participating in demonstrations, but those of everyone else as well, have been violated.

The Asian Human Rights Commission has for some time insisted upon the importance of studying the characteristics and implications of what it has rightly described as Burma's "injustice system" in order to appreciate how its military rulers degrade all aspects of life and institutions there. Under the current conditions too, ordinary persons have been made the victims of their arbitrary control by the state and its agencies. Yesterday, protest; today, no trial: this is the perverted response of autocrats to any challenge upon their authority. It is this sort of cause and effect that deserves much more attention and analysis in order that the situation in Burma be properly understood and addressed by concerned persons both inside and outside of the country.

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The Irrawaddy <news@irrawaddy.org>

Junta Steps Up Propaganda Campaign against Pro- democracy Movement - http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=8554

By Association Press - September 9, 2007

Burma's military government stepped up its propaganda campaign against the country's pro-democracy movement Sunday, alleging top activists planned terrorist acts and received money from Western nations.

The junta also charged that Htay Kywe, a prominent activist who escaped a security dragnet last month, was assisted in hiding by the embassy of a powerful country.

The allegations came as the junta grapples with scattered but spirited protests against its economic policies.

Burma faces condemnation from much of the world community for its hard-line toward nonviolent dissent, particularly its rough handling of demonstrations that began Aug 19 to protest a hike in fuel prices and rise in the cost of consumer goods.

The protests took a more confrontational tone last week in northern Burma, when Buddhist monks angry at being beaten up for protesting fuel prices temporarily took government officials hostage and later smashed up a shop and a house belonging to junta supporters.

A news release issued by the junta's Information Committee and published Sunday in state-run newspaper The New

Light of Myanmar, charged that „internal and external pessimist and opposition groups are striving to create riots and disturbances? similar to the mass pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988.

The aim of the groups was „to gain power by a short cut,“ it said.

The 1988 uprising was brutally crushed by the military.

The statement also implied that the United States was involved in the opposition groups? plans. It cited funds that US organizations were said to have given to dissident groups.

It said „a world-famous organization of a powerful state provided US \$100,000 under the heading of helping refugees,“ but alleged the money was actually used for training courses in bomb-making and demolition.

The statement said Htay Kywe, a leader of the 88 Generation Students group who is still in hiding, was being helped by a foreign embassy.

„Htay Kywe is still at large, as he had been hidden at a secure place by an embassy of a powerful country,“ the statement said, without providing further details.

About a dozen members of Htay Kywe's group were rounded up shortly after organizing the first of the current round of protests.

They were being held on charges of trying to disrupt the country's National Convention, which is setting guidelines for a new constitution. If convicted, they could each face up to 20 years in prison.

The convention completed its work on September 3 with guidelines that would keep the military heavily involved in administering the country, and bar detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from holding political office.

Htay Kywe has issued several statements from hiding, including a September 6 letter urging the UN Security Council to take up the Burma issue.

„We, the 88 Generation Students leaders, initiated these peaceful marches not only to protest against the hike in fuel prices, but to bring attention to the immense suffering of the people of Burma,“ Htay Kywe said in his letter.

„Our goal has always been, and will remain, peaceful transition to a democratic society and national reconciliation through substantive dialogue that is also the objective of the United Nations,“ he said.

The government's statement said to ensure security it „will continue to take preventive measures against those malicious collaborated efforts to commit terrorist destructive acts by the internal and external terrorist groups.“

The Irrawaddy Online Newsletter for September 16, 2007 - The Irrawaddy <news@irrawaddy.org>(18.09.2007)

Monks Ready to Demonstrate Tuesday ; Regime Ready to Crackdown - By Shah Paung
- http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=8622

September 16, 2007

Burmese monks released a second statement on Saturday saying monks should not accept alms from members of the military government and their supporters, starting on Monday, and called for a demonstration of monks nationwide on Tuesday.

The announcement came in a second leaflet released by a group calling itself "The Alliance of All Burmese Monks." The first leaflet, released last week, demanded an apology from the junta by Monday for using violence against monks in peaceful demonstrations.

The first announcement warned authorities that monks would enact a "*patam nikkuijana kamma*," or refusal to accept alms, if an apology was not made.

The second statement calls for a peaceful march on Tuesday at 1 p.m. in Mandalay, Rangoon and other towns.

Monks in Mandalay were urged to march from their monasteries to Maha Myat Muni Pagoda. Monks in Rangoon were told to march from their monasteries to Shwedagone Pagoda.

Monks in other townships and villages were advised to march from their monasteries to well-known nearby pagodas.

The statement also called for an alms boycott of all members of the Union of Solidarity and Development Association, Swan Arr Shin, a paramilitary group, and all government workers.

A monk at Masoeyin Monastery in Mandalay said on Sunday: "We are preparing for this [protest]. If all monks agree, we will carry on. The main thing is we have to be united."

A monk at Bawdi Mandine Monastery in Pakokku told *The Irrawaddy* on Sunday monks in the monastery will likely join

the demonstration.

It escalates the stand-off between the highly respected Sangha, or organization of monks, and the military junta, following rising tension between the two sides.

Meanwhile, the Burmese military government has increased security in many restive towns across the country.

Observers say the stage is set for a violent confrontation between the public, gangs of thugs who support the junta and military troops.

An activist in Mandalay who asked to be anonymous told *The Irrawaddy* on Sunday that authorities have provided about 20 machetes to each *Damayone* (a gathering place for Buddhist religious purposes) that is believed to be loyal to authorities.

He said he had heard that officials told paramilitary groups that support the junta to crackdown on anyone involved in a demonstration, whether monks or ordinary citizens, by using the machetes.

He said that it appears to be a standing order, and the junta-friendly groups, made up of thugs, can exercise their discretion on how to put down protestors.

Residents in Pegu about 80 km north of Rangoon also say authorities there, including the USDA and the SAS, have been positioned at locations across the town, particularly near monasteries.

Scattered groups of thugs are said to number about 50 members each, carrying bamboo sticks and slingshots. Sources at Pegu said some members have shaved their heads and may have Buddhist robes to wear, an apparent move to infiltrate groups of monks.

Residents in Rangoon said on Saturday morning about 100,000 members of the USDA and SAS had gathered at Thuwunna Stadium in Rangoon to be briefed by authorities.

Meanwhile, local sources say Burmese security officers continue to keep a close watch on key members of the National League for Democracy in several towns of Irrawaddy Division. Some NLD members are not allowed to leave their homes.

September 17, 2007 - **The Irrawaddy** Online News Alert: - The Irrawaddy <news@irrawaddy.org>

Leading Activist in Hiding Warns of Dangerous Days Ahead

By **Kyaw Zwa Moe** - http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=8629

September 17, 2007

leading Burmese activist who has been in hiding for weeks says that potential protest demonstrations in coming days will probably be organized better than those in the 1988 nationwide pro-democracy uprising but the prospect of bloodshed is high.

Tun Myint Aung, a member of the 88 Generation Students group, spoke to *The Irrawaddy* on Monday about Burma's politically volatile state, following weeks of protest marches by pro-democracy groups and monks.

Tun Myint Aung is one of the 88 group's leading members still at-large, following the arrests of 13 leading members, including prominent Min Ko Naing, on August 21 following street protests against the regime's sharp hike in fuel prices.

"People today are more aware of politics, and the current political situation thanks to the media abroad," the activist said by telephone from his hiding place.

Tun Myint Aung said the Burmese people are facing an economic crisis as great as that in the 1980s. And people, including businessmen, can visibly see the ruling generals and their families and cronies enjoy unearned economic privileges, he said.

"The general discontent in the public is high," said Tun Myint Aung. But he added that fear of the junta's iron-fisted rule keeps many people from joining the protests, although they support goals. Another reason is simply that most people can't risk leaving their daily job upon which they are barely surviving.

He said protesters in recent demonstrations are more courageous than those in 1988.

"In '88, we wore masks while protesting so we could not be identified," he said. "The protesters today wore nothing though they knew they would be arrested later."

Tun Myint Aung said pro-democracy groups must show leadership. "Our groups, including the main opposition National League for Democracy, should have strong and decisive leadership" that mirrors the needs and the feelings of the people.

In terms of the current leadership strategy, he said, "We have been in hiding in order to carry on the movement" but organizing has become more difficult, because members of his group have lost close communication following the cut off in recent days of mobile cell phone and land-line service to prominent activists and groups.

"Our movement has gone underground again," he said.

FOR PEACE, FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURMA

However, he was optimistic about the current protests. "Pro-democracy groups will be able to grab opportunities this time," he said. "Unlike '88, we have the NLD and other political groups. And Daw Suu [Aung San Suu Kyi] is here though she is under house arrest."

During the '88 uprising, the then late dictator Ne Win's authoritarian government, then called the Burma Socialist Program Party, lost control of many government ministries, but the military troops put down the protestors. However, at the time there were no organized opposition groups, he noted.

"This time we want to get this movement done beautifully without bloodshed," he said, recalling the bloodshed in 1988 when an estimated 3,000 protesters were killed by the government's soldiers.

Can bloodshed be avoided this time? Tun Myint Aung said he isn't sure.

"Because that's their [the junta's] choice," he said. Looking back at the junta's violent crackdown on protestors in August and early September, he said there are no signs the junta has changed its attitude and a violent, bloody crackdown could easily happen in the coming days.

As Tun Myint Aung spoke to *The Irrawaddy*, events were moving forward inexorably.

Monday was the deadline set by "The Alliance of All Burmese Buddhist Monks" for the junta to apologize for the violence used against monks in Pakokku, located about 370 km north of Rangoon, in early September. Apparently, no apology was offered.

On Monday morning, hundreds of monks staged peaceful demonstrations in Chauk in Magwe Division and in Kyaukpadaung in Mandalay Division.

The alliance of monks has called on fellow monks in cities across Burma to peacefully march from their monasteries to local pagodas on Tuesday in protest against the junta. Local analysts say the stage is set for what could be a violent clash between monks and the junta's supporters.

"Whether or not the current protests will rise up to the level of the one in '88 depends on the ruling generals and the way they treat the protests," said Tun Myint Aung.

September 21, 2007 - Associated Press

Public joins monks in Myanmar protest

THE BURMANET NEWS - September 21, 2007 Issue # 3297 - "Editor" <editor@burmanet.org> - www.burmanet.org

Nearly 1,000 Buddhist monks, joined by thousands of their countrymen, marched in Myanmar's largest city Thursday in the biggest challenge in at least a decade to the iron-fisted junta, a show of strength rare under military rule.

Authorities normally quick to crack down hard on dissent left the marchers alone, apparently wary of stirring up further problems. The monks said they would march again next week.

Processions of monks converged from various monasteries around Yangon in the early afternoon at the golden hilltop Shwedagon pagoda, the country's most revered shrine. They prayed there before embarking on a more than three-hour march through Yangon in steady rain, gathering supporters as they went.

Monks at the head of the procession carried religious flags and an upside-down alms bowl, a symbol of protest.

Some monks are refusing alms from the military and their families a religious boycott deeply embarrassing to the junta. In the Myanmar language, the term for "boycott" comes from the words for holding an alms bowl upside down.

As the monks marched calmly through the streets, some onlookers offered refreshments while others kept the streets clean by picking up water bottles.

The government appeared to be handling the situation gingerly, aware that any action seen as mistreating the monks could ignite public outrage. They are aware that restraining monks poses a dilemma, because monks are highly respected in predominant Buddhist Myanmar, and abusing them in any manner could cause public outrage.

A member of one of the junta's neighborhood councils said it had been given instructions by authorities not to interfere with the protesting monks.

"We've been instructed to be patient and to even protect the monks," said the official, who asked not to be named because he is not authorized to release information.

No uniformed security personnel were in sight, although dozens in plainclothes stood by without interfering. Car and motorbikes carrying junta supporters present at most previous protests were also absent.

Rumors that a state of emergency had been declared were denied by a government spokesman.

"You can see the government handling the situation peacefully," the Information Ministry's Ye Htut said in an e-mail.

"Anti-government groups want to see the state of emergency because their objective is to exploit and provoke the Sangha (monks), students, workers and innocent people," and to provoke riots and anarchy, he said. "So they use rumors to destabilize the situation."

While many bystanders clasped their hands together in a traditional gesture of respect as the procession passed, others joined in to march with the monks.

Witnesses said the number of marchers swelled to as many as 5,000 by the end, many of them linking arms in a human chain to protect the monks from outside agitators.

It was the third straight day that monks have marched in Yangon. Their activities have given new life to a protest movement that began a month ago after a huge government-ordered increase in fuel prices.

The protests express long pent-up opposition to the repressive regime and have become the most sustained challenge to the junta since a wave of student demonstrations that were forcibly suppressed in December 1996.

The junta's crackdown on the protesters has drawn increasing criticism >from world leaders, including U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and President Bush. They have called for the government to release opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate who has been under house arrest for more than 11 of the past 18 years.

The U.N.'s envoy to Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, focused on the protests in a Security Council briefing Thursday.

"The developments over the last few weeks in Myanmar have raised serious concerns in the international community and once again underscore the urgency to step up our efforts to find solutions to the challenges facing the country," Gambari told the council, according to a U.N. account of the closed session.

Gambari said he was very concerned about protesters who have been detained and expressed hope for their release.

The demonstrations had been faltering, with about 200 protesters being detained, before the monks entered the fray.

Monks angered over being manhandled at a Sept. 5 demonstration in Pakokku in north central Myanmar had threatened to take to the streets unless the junta apologized. The regime remained silent, so they launched protests around the country on Tuesday that have been steadily growing.

Monks may now be assuming the vanguard because top pro-democracy activists were rounded up soon after the start of the demonstrations, said Debbie Stothard of Altsean-Burma, a Bangkok, Thailand-based coalition of non-governmental groups working for human rights and democracy in Myanmar, also known as Burma.

"In these situations, the monks have sought to protect the civilian population by taking sole responsibility for these protests," she said by e-mail. "Despite this, if the monks are violently attacked en masse, it will be inevitable that the rest of the population will weigh in."

The monks and their followers in Yangon stopped briefly in front of the U.S. Embassy. Washington is a top critic of the junta.

Speaking to the crowd, an unidentified monk said people's lives were getting worse because the government was "unjust and selfish."

"We will stage our marches every sabbath day," said another monk who sat on a huge ornamental chair. The next Buddhist sabbath falls on Sept. 26.

As the monks marched, they chanted sermons, avoiding explicit anti-government gestures. But their message of protest was unmistakable to fellow citizens as monks normally leave their monasteries only for morning rounds with bowls seeking alms.

Unconfirmed reports said monks staged protests in several other cities Thursday, including Pakokku and Monywa in north central Myanmar.

Monks have historically been at the forefront of protests in the country, first against British colonialism and later against military dictatorship. They played a prominent part in a failed 1988 pro-democracy uprising that sought an end to military rule, imposed since 1962.

AP writer Sarah DiLorenzo at the United Nations contributed to this report.

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The Fighting Monks of Burma TIME, Wednesday, Sep. 19, 2007

By HANNAH BEECH - <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1663397,00.html?xid=rss-world>

Nearly 400 Burmese Buddhist monk march through Yangon to protest the military junta's alleged use of violence against Buddhist monks at Pakokku, a site in the upper part of Myanmar.

Saffron robes usually evoke spiritual calm. But for Burma's military leaders, a surprise gathering of monks is anything but peaceful. On Wednesday in the commercial capital Rangoon, hundreds of Buddhist clergy gathered around the nation's beloved Shwedagon pagoda to protest August price hikes that are decimating an already impoverished populace. More than a thousand monks also rallied in other parts of the country, their daily alms routes turned into paths of protest.

Wednesday's demonstrations cap what has turned into the longest sustained display of dissent in Burma in nearly two decades. At first, the ruling junta, which has maintained an iron grip for 45 years, tried to extinguish the protest movement by arresting dozens of pro-democracy activists. But clapping handcuffs on Buddhist monks is a far more difficult proposition in this deeply devout nation. "The monks are the only ones who really have the trust of the people," says Khin Omar, an exiled dissident now living in Thailand. "When they speak up, people listen."

Unluckily for the junta, the monks have been speaking up ever more loudly. On September 5, protests by clergy members in the holy city of Pakokku turned violent when security forces fired warning shots in the air, only to have the monks respond by taking officials hostage and torching their cars.

Unholy behavior, perhaps. But the incident prompted senior spiritual leaders to demand an apology from the government by Sept. 17 or else rallies would resume. On Tuesday, with no apology in sight, the monks began marching anew.

The spectacle of more shaven-headed youth crowding the streets must send chills down the ruling generals' spines. After all, it was Burma's monks who spearheaded acts of civil disobedience against British colonialists. Buddhist clergy were also at the forefront of mass protests in 1988, which ended when the army gunned down hundreds of peaceful protestors and declared martial law. So far, the military has avoided firing directly at the monks. But with these spiritual warriors showing no sign of giving up their cause, a violent confrontation may be unavoidable.

September 21, 2007 - **The Irrawaddy** Online News Alert: -The Irrawaddy <news@irrawaddy.org>

Monks Issue Call for Public to Join Demonstrations - By Violet Cho

September 21, 2007 - http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=8700

Burmese Buddhist monks called on students and civilians to join hands with them in public protests against the military regime which has ruled the country for almost 20 years.

The Federation of All Burma Young Monks Unions issued a statement on Thursday saying, „It is time for the Burmese people to work with monks and courageously demonstrate their genuine aspirations.“

This was the first official call by protesting monks for the public to take part in their demonstration marches which have spread across the country during the past week. Previously, the monks asked the public not to join their protests.

Students should lift their own "fighting peacock flag," a symbol of struggle against the military regime, in the demonstrations, the statement said.

An 88 Generation Students group leader, Tun Myint Aung, told *The Irrawaddy* on Friday: "We strongly welcome this statement by the monks because it's a very good approach calling on everyone from different parts of society to join hands and work for the liberation of the people."

If students and monks take the lead, together with masses of civilians, the people can effectively express their feelings and desires, he said.

A leading Burmese poet, Aung Way, said the artist community should also join in solidarity with the monks and people.

"It's time for all Burmese artists and poets to join together with the monks who have taken the lead in the protests against the regime," Aung Way said.

The statement also called on monks throughout Burma to rally together in unity and to expand the protests throughout the country.

Monks began their protest demonstrations in Rangoon and other cities on Tuesday after the junta failed to offer an apology for violence used against monks in Pakokku on September 6. Monks have marched with their alms bowls turned upside down, a symbol of a boycott of alms from the military regime and its supporters.

Starting on August 19, the 88 Generation Students group and other pro-democracy activists began protest demonstrations in Rangoon and other cities.

Associated Press - September 22, 2007

Monks put Myanmar junta in tight spot- Michael Casey

THE BURMANET NEWS - September 22, 2007 Issue # 3298 - "Editor" <editor@burmanet.org> - www.burmanet.org

Armed only with upturned begging bowls, chanting Buddhist monks in Myanmar have caught the country's military rulers off guard with their peaceful protests.

They have emboldened the public to take to the streets by the thousands to support the most dramatic anti-government protests the isolated Southeast Asian nation has seen in a decade.

Braving monsoon rains, monks in traditional maroon robes demonstrated for a fourth straight day Friday in the country's largest city, Yangon. Followed by clapping onlookers, about 1,500 monks marched after praying at the Shwedagon Pagoda, the nation's holiest shrine and a gathering place for anti-government demonstrations including the failed 1988 democratic uprising.

The monks, who are widely respected in the mostly Buddhist society, bring moral authority to the movement with their nonviolent practices and sheer numbers: There are 500,000 in monasteries across the country.

Their assumption of a leadership role in protests poses perhaps the gravest threat to the junta since the 1988 uprising when the military fired on peaceful crowds, killing thousands and terrorizing the country.

It has put the regime in a quandary over whether to crack down or take a chance and allow the protests to run their course.

Josef Silverstein, a Myanmar expert and retired Rutgers University professor, said the junta may be hesitating to act until it assesses how many monks support the protests and who is actually leading them. Yet waiting much longer could be risky.

"The monks are showing that without arms and nothing more than prayers and marching that they are capable of having greater freedom than people have had," he said. "This could encourage people to be more resistant. The longer this stalemate goes on, the weaker the military looks to the country and outside."

Images of the monks have increased support for the opposition's cause worldwide. Washington, the United Nations and Hollywood stars have called on the junta to enact democratic reforms and release the leader of the pro-democracy opposition, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, along with other political prisoners.

The current demonstrations are the most militant since December 1996, when students gathered in Yangon to demand improvements in education and the right to organize in a union.

The military, which has controlled Myanmar since 1962, has withstood waves of domestic and international protests since 1988 and shows no signs of yielding now. Even if the people are angry and emboldened, and the junta is treated as a pariah by the West, there are no signs of disunity in the army. And the support of neighboring nations, most notably China, as well as oil and gas revenues, keep the military in a commanding position.

Aung Zaw, a Burmese editor of The Irrawaddy, a Thailand-based magazine that covers Myanmar, said the military knows that brutalizing the monks could prompt the wider public - which has largely remained on the sidelines_ to join the protests.

"Authorities are at odds over how to deal with the monks at the point. As you know, monks are respected and influential people," Aung Zaw said. "If you are going to physically attack them, it could really provoke public anger and invite more troubles."

Aung Zaw said in the history of Burma, as Myanmar is also known, the military leadership has always resolved such challenges by force.

"Sooner or later, there will be a crackdown," Aung Zaw said. "They will never compromise or open dialogue."

Myanmar ranks among the 20 poorest countries in the world, according to the United Nations, with most people living on less than \$200 a year. The United Nations and others have blamed inept military leaders for bungling Myanmar's economy, spending excessive amounts of money on a new capital and on maintaining one of the world's largest armies.

The latest protests were triggered when authorities raised fuel prices as much as 500 percent in August. Strapped for cash, the regime was forced to slash the subsidies it had used to keep fuel cheap.

The cost of public transport skyrocketed and families suddenly found themselves having to walk to work and sell household goods to survive.

The government, which has a monopoly on fuel sales, raised prices of fuel >from about \$1.40 to \$2.80 a gallon, and boosted the price of natural gas by about 500 percent.

Government opponents began demonstrating over the price hikes Aug. 19, but the protests were quickly contained by the junta with waves of arrests and beatings. With activists in jail or hiding, the leadership role fell to the monks.

The monks launched their protests Tuesday after the junta failed to apologize for allegedly roughing up Buddhist clergy during a demonstration in the northern town of Pakokku on Sept. 5.

Monks are demanding the government reduce fuel prices, release all political prisoners and begin negotiations with Suu Kyi and other democratic leaders.

What makes this week's protests different than the student-led uprising of 1988 are the monks' non-confrontational tactics ? their orderly marches and religious chanting has yet to provoke the military.

Monks leading the procession have carried upside-down alms bowl ? a symbol of protest. Some monks are refusing alms from the military and their families ? a religious boycott deeply embarrassing to the junta. In the Myanmar language, the term for "boycott" comes from the words for holding an alms bowl upside down.

Penny Edwards, a professor of Southeast Asian history at the University of California at Berkeley, said the monks' protests posed a great challenge to the government's moral legitimacy and claims of support for Buddhism.

Since similar protests in 1990, Edwards said the junta has invested massive amounts of money and publicity in their campaign to materially support Buddhism, partly through temple renovations.

"This is the first sustained challenge by the monkhood to this Buddhist-centered campaign of the junta, which has at least superficially been able to claim that it has some legitimacy as a primary material sponsor of Buddhism," said Edwards.

The junta has tried to blame the trouble on Suu Kyi's political party and Western powers.

"You can see the government handles the situation peacefully," the Information Ministry's Ye Htut told The Associated Press on Thursday. "Anti-government groups want to see the state of emergency because their objective is to exploit and provoke sangha (monks), students, workers and innocent people into making another 1988-style riot," Ye Htut said.

Plainclothes police and pro-junta thugs, who in the early days of the demonstrations rounded up and beat activists, have mostly left the monks alone.

But if the protests gain traction, Silverstein and other analysts say it's possible that the military may make concessions, perhaps including drafting a more democratic constitution.

Associated Press writer Michael Casey has covered Southeast Asia for five years. Associated Press writer Lily Hindy contributed to this report from New York.

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UN Security Council Discusses Burma's Latest Situation

VOA News – Washington - 20 September 2007

The 15 members of the United Nations Security Council met Thursday to discuss the situation in Burma.

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad, told reporters that the Council is urging Burma's government to allow a visit by U.N. special envoy Ibrahim Gambari "as soon as possible."

Meanwhile, hundreds of Buddhist monks have marched through Rangoon for a third day to demonstrate against Burma's military government.

Several hundred locals joined the monks Thursday as they marched peacefully in the rain from the Shwedagon pagoda to another pagoda in the capital.

The monks have taken the lead in demonstrations that began last month after the government doubled the price of fuel,

FOR PEACE, FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURMA

making transportation difficult for many of Burma's impoverished citizens.

Authorities arrested at least 50 activists in those demonstrations, but have refrained from taking strong action against the monks.

The government acknowledged using tear gas and firing warning shots to break up a protest in Sittwe Tuesday. Authorities refrained from intervening in marches Wednesday.

Monks are highly regarded in the devoutly Buddhist country and are credited with helping rally popular support for a 1988 protest against the government. Security forces ended those demonstrations with deadly force.

Free all political prisoners, free Aung San Suu Kyi, free Burma.

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Published by : Burma Buero e.V., P.O.Box 27 03 66, DE-50509 Cologne Tel: + 49 (0) 221-9522450 Fax:+ 49(0) 221-9522470
e-Mail: <burmabureaugermany@t-online.de> - <http://www.burmabureaugermany.com>