

# Burmese military cracks down on escalating protests

Sujeewa Amaranath  
27 September 2007

The military in Burma (Myanmar) unleashed its troops yesterday on unarmed demonstrators in a bid to stamp out mounting protests against the junta's stifling rule, and price rises that have made life for broad layers of working people unbearable.

A series of clashes took place in the former capital Rangoon (Yangon) as protestors, including many Buddhist monks, took to the streets in defiance of the military. On Tuesday, the junta imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in Rangoon and Mandalay, the country's second largest city, and banned assemblies of more than five people. Heavily-armed troops were stationed in key positions, including outside major monasteries that have become centres of protest.

The state media yesterday reported that at least one protestor was killed in clashes in Rangoon between demonstrators and security forces. An unnamed official told the AFP that three people were dead—one was killed after trying to seize a soldier's rifle and two others were beaten to death. Other reports from individuals and opposition groups indicate that the toll could be higher. Another 300 people were reportedly arrested.

The clashes began outside the Shwedagon Pagoda but failed to deter an estimated 10,000 young monks and students from marching toward the Sule Pagoda in downtown Rangoon. Hundreds of troops fired warning shots and tear gas then broke up the protest using batons. Several hundred monks also tried to reach the house of detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, followed by trucks carrying troops. In Mandalay, an estimated 10,000 people took part in protests.

The protests have been building since the junta's decision on August 15 to suddenly double the price of diesel and raise the price of natural gas by 500 percent. Within days, as transport prices jumped, the cost of essential items rose by between 10 and 50 percent. Eggs, cooking oil and poultry increased by an average of 35 percent. The regime, which has a monopoly on fuel sales, had previously subsidised prices.

Initially the marches, which were organised by students and began on August 19, were quite small. The protests, however, have continued to swell despite arrests and police violence. Over the weekend, tens of thousands took part in demonstrations in Rangoon. On Monday, protests took place in

at least 25 cities including Mandalay, Stitwe and Pakokku. The march in Rangoon was estimated at between 50,000 and 100,000 people.

The demonstrations are by far the largest since 1988 when huge protests involving students, workers, monks, and the urban and rural poor challenged the military dictatorship, demanding democratic rights and improved living standards. The army responded by gunning down hundreds of protesters, jailing opposition leaders and suppressing any form of political opposition. An estimated 3,000 people were killed by the military and many more were detained and tortured.

Speaking over state radio on Monday night, the junta's religious affairs minister, Brigadier General Thura Myint Maung, denounced the "destructive elements" behind the protests and warned "actions will be taken against the monks according to the law". On Tuesday, police arrested U Win Naing, a senior leader of Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy (NLD) and Zaganar, a popular comedian who is known for satirising the regime. Zaganar had appealed for people to join the protests. Yesterday the crackdown intensified.

The international media has highlighted the role of Buddhist monks in the current protests. Their prominence, however, is a function of the timidity and conservatism of Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders, who appear to have been caught off guard by the demonstrations. Far from seeking to challenge the junta, the NLD is seeking to limit the protests and exploit them as a bargaining chip to establish negotiations with the generals.

The British-based *Times* noted yesterday: "Opposition leaders in Rangoon are struggling to contain the energy of the demonstrations to prevent anything that could be used as a pretext for a crackdown by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), as the junta calls itself. They fear a split between radicals, who want to bring down the regime, and moderates, who believe that the most important thing is to avoid frightening off ordinary Burmese and bring them out in an overwhelming display of moral authority."

NLD leader Sann Aung told the *Times*: "There should be no agitation to topple the military regime. It will make people much more wary of a military response and people will become reluctant to join the movement." The newspaper also pointed to

the limited character of the demands made by senior monks: an apology for abuse by the regime, a reduction in fuel prices, the release of political prisoners and political dialogue with the junta.

These appeals for restraint are, however, opening the door for further military repression. By confining the anger of ordinary working people, the opposition leaders will only embolden the generals to go on the offensive against the protests. That is the central political lesson of the events of 1988, when Suu Kyi and the NLD struck a deal with the junta to hold elections and shut down the protest movement. The junta seized the deal with both hands, stabilised their rule and then ignored the outcome of the 1990 poll, in which the NLD won an overwhelming majority.

For nearly two decades, the NLD's perspective has been confined to using the pressure of sanctions imposed by the major powers to reach a compromise with the junta. As for its professions of concern for the Burmese population, the NLD supports the IMF and World Bank's free market policies of opening up the country to foreign investors. The social consequences are evident in the junta's slashing of fuel subsidies last month, entirely in line with this agenda.

Even before the latest price rises, inflation was running at more than 30 percent and 90 percent of the population lived below the poverty line of \$US1 a day. The 450,000-strong army accounts for 40 percent of the annual national budget. An unemployed economics graduate told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "Many people can no longer afford to send their children to school. They're down to one meal a day, it's that bad. As a result many are malnourished and they're falling ill. But then they can't even find the money for medical bills. Sure, we had difficulties before, but the price rises broke the camel's back. Living standards have gone down and down. The middle classes have become poor, and the poor have become destitute."

The military crackdown has produced an outpouring of hypocrisy from world leaders, led by President Bush, and in the international media. Speaking at the UN General Assembly on Tuesday, Bush condemned the Burmese junta and announced the imposition of new sanctions against individual leaders. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown denounced the regime as "illegitimate and repressive" while French President Nicolas Sarkozy urged the EU to impose tougher penalties against the junta. An emergency meeting of the UN Security Council was convened behind closed doors yesterday to consider the situation.

None of this has anything to do with concern for the Burmese people and their rights. Elsewhere in South Asia, the Bush administration maintains the closest of relations with the Pakistani military dictator General Pervez Musharraf and keeps a diplomatic silence on India's police-state measures in Kashmir, the repressive activities of the military-backed regime in Bangladesh and the autocratic methods of the Sri Lankan government as it wages a vicious communal civil war.

Washington's objection to the Burmese junta is not its repressive methods, but its close alignment with China. Burma is strategically situated between China and India, next to South East Asia and close to key shipping lanes, in particular the Malacca Straits. The country also has significant natural resources, including an estimated 3 trillion cubic metres of natural gas and 3 billion barrels of crude oil.

For Beijing, Burma is an important strategic and economic partner. China provides weapons and diplomatic support to the military and is involved in developing the country's infrastructure. In return, Beijing is seeking rights over the country's oil and gas as well as strategic access to Burmese ports and military bases. During the first seven months of this year, China-Burmese trade reached \$US1.1 billion, up 39.4 percent compared to the same period last year.

At the same time, there is growing rivalry for influence in Burma between China and India. High-level visits by Indian officials have been on the rise, two-way trade is increasing and India has provided loans and aid to the junta in a bid to win favour. In 2004, junta leader Than Shwe was given the red carpet treatment when he became the first Burmese head of state to visit India in 24 years. This year Indian oil company ONGC made a bid to buy Burmese gas, but lost out last month to Petro-China. Thailand is also investing in a huge \$6 billion hydroelectricity project.

The steady stream of articles, particularly in the US, insinuating that China is to blame for the Burmese junta and demanding action from Beijing, is not matched by similar comments about India, an increasingly close US ally, or Thailand, another military dictatorship, which enjoys tacit US backing. The Bush administration's calls for "democracy" in Burma are a pretext to press for the installation of a pro-US regime.

The US administration is no more concerned about democratic rights and the plight of the population in Burma, than it is in Iraq. As far as Washington is concerned, the ousting of the Burmese junta is an element of a broader US strategy of encircling China, which is emerging as a key strategic and economic competitor, as well as gaining access for American corporations to Burma's natural resources and cheap labour.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**