

Burmese troops gun down protestors

By Sujeewa Amaranath and Peter Symonds
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Over the past two days, the Burmese military regime has brutally suppressed large anti-junta protests in the major cities of Rangoon and Mandalay, breaking up crowds with tear gas, batons, rubber bullets and live rounds. The state media reported that nine people died in clashes on Thursday, but reports from activists, diplomats and a handful of foreign journalists suggest the figure could be considerably higher.

The crackdown began on Wednesday night and early Thursday morning when troops raided monasteries, including the Shwedagon Pagoda and Sule Pagoda in Rangoon, arresting hundreds of Buddhist monks. Five key monasteries, which have been centres of opposition, were declared no-go areas and sealed off to prevent protestors from gathering.

In one incident, soldiers forced their way into the Ngwe Kyar monastery in South Okkalapa, a suburb of Rangoon, Wednesday night and arrested about 100 monks. Thousands of people gathered in nearby streets and began pelting the troops with stones. Eight people, including a high school student, died when soldiers opened fire with automatic weapons.

Up to 70,000 people defied a military ban and marched in Rangoon on Thursday. Protests reportedly took place in Mandalay and other centres, including Sittwe, Pakokku and Moulmein. In central Rangoon, near the Sule Pagoda, some 20 truckloads of troops and police set up roadblocks. As protestors threw stones and bottles, the security forces responded with shots and tear gas. Eyewitnesses said the military gave people 10 minutes to disperse and started firing.

Among the dead was a Japanese journalist, Kenji Nagai, 50, who was photographing the clashes. The state media claimed that a stray bullet had killed him, but amateur video shown on Japan's Fuji television showed him being deliberately shot.

Reports of protests yesterday were scanty. The country's main Internet connection had been cut, blocking the stream of photographs, video and reports that were reaching the outside world in previous days.

The mobile phone network was also not functioning. While officials reported damage to an undersea cable, there is little doubt that the generals have ordered the censorship.

A correspondent for the London-based *Times* described smaller protests near the Sule Pagoda and clashes of young demonstrators with heavily-armed security forces. "It was a loose, ragged, frustrating day in Rangoon, a day of baton charges, beatings and many rumours of much worse. I saw soldiers levelling guns, firing volleys of hard rubber pellets, as well as chases and arrests," he wrote.

Agence France Presse reported that up to 10,000 people were involved in protests yesterday in central Rangoon and repeatedly confronted troops and police. A separate group of around 500 marched through the streets and were applauded by onlookers. In Mandalay, thousands of young people on motorbikes rode down a major thoroughfare toward a blockade set up by security forces, but were driven back.

The police round up of opposition leaders, including members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, is continuing. An NLD official told the media that two prominent leaders, Hla Pe and Myint Thei, were arrested in raids on their homes. Members of the 88 Generation Students Group, an organisation formed last year by veterans of the 1988 protests against the junta, have been detained.

Students, young monks and ordinary people are displaying great courage in confronting the junta and its troops, and demanding basic democratic rights and better living standards. However, the limited character of the opposition's political perspective is underscored by its appeals to the UN and major powers to intervene.

The condemnations of the junta by US President George Bush, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and other leaders reek of hypocrisy. The Bush administration and its allies are no more concerned about democratic rights in Burma than in Iraq, where the US military is every bit as ruthless as its Burmese counterparts in suppressing popular opposition to its continued

occupation.

Washington's objection to the Burmese junta is not its suppression of democratic rights, but its close alignment with China. Over the past week, the American media in particular has tried to pin the blame for the junta's violence on the failure of Beijing to take sufficiently strong action. A *Washington Post* editorial on Thursday, for instance, was entitled "Save Burma: Will China and Russia give green light to a slaughter of monks?" It criticised the two powers for blocking a UN resolution condemning the violence in Burma.

No doubt, China and Russia are cynically supporting repressive regimes to advance their economic and strategic interests. But they are not alone. In the case of Burma, India quietly dropped its criticism of the junta and is seeking to extend its economic and diplomatic influence in the country. Burma's largest trading partner is not China, but neighbouring Thailand, which is ruled by a military dictatorship with tacit US support. The Bush administration's campaign on Burma is not motivated by concerns for ordinary Burmese, but is aimed at establishing a pro-US regime in Rangoon as part of its strategic encirclement of China.

Moreover, one can safely predict that the present media adulation for the protestors would rapidly change if the demonstrations and marches began to take a more radical direction. Unlike the protests of 1988, which involved significant sections of workers, the recent demonstrations have been, to date, largely dominated by monks and students. The entry of substantial sections of working people into political action would not only shake the junta, but would reverberate through the region and internationally.

Far from being endowed with great strength, the Burmese junta is acting from a position of weakness. Despised by the majority of the population, the generals are confronting a profound economic crisis. Despite the development of offshore gas fields, the economy is plagued by inflation, which is running at an estimated annual rate of 20 percent, and chronic shortages of investment and foreign exchange. Economic analysts generally treat the official claims of high growth rates with scepticism. In 2003, the regime declared a growth figure of 5.1 percent, even as it confronted a private banking crisis and banned the export of six major crops.

The gulf between the pampered lifestyle of the generals and the poverty confronting the majority of the population is staggering. More than 90 percent of the population live on less than 300,000 kyat (about \$US300) a year. An

estimated 43 percent of children under the age of five are malnourished. On average, nearly 70 percent of household income is spent on food—that is, surviving from one day to the next. Spending on health care and education amounts to just 1.4 percent of GDP—less than half that of Indonesia, the region's next lowest spender.

The latest protests were triggered last month by the junta's decision to slash price subsidies on petrol, diesel and gas, increasing transport costs and sending the price of basic items skyrocketing. Opposition leaders, however, have not sought to mobilise the social discontent of ordinary working people to bring down the junta, but rather deliberately limited the protest demands.

A statement released by the 88 Generation Students and the All Burma Monks Alliance last week listed just three demands: the release of political prisoners, economic well-being and national reconciliation. Like Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, these groups are seeking to use the protests and international diplomacy to pressure the regime into dialogue and a compromise power-sharing arrangement. The NLD's basic program, which consists of implementing IMF-dictated reforms to open Burma up to foreign investors, would be just as catastrophic for ordinary working people as the junta's economic policies.

The conclusion that some of the veterans of the 1988 protests appear to have drawn is that their previous demands were too radical. In fact, the opposite is the case. In 1988, the junta was reeling under the impact of strikes in the oil industry, transport, postal services, telecommunications and factories, as well as widespread protests. It managed to cling to power by striking a deal with the NLD to end the protests in return for elections in 1990. Having stabilised their rule, the generals simply ignored the outcome of the poll, suppressed the opposition and continued in power.

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