



MILITARY, MONKS FACE OFF IN MYANMAR

September 26, 2007

Security forces in Myanmar (formerly called Burma) opened fire on protests led by Buddhist monks Wednesday, as civilians joined religious leaders to challenge the military regime.

Witnesses said police beat and dragged away dozens of Buddhist monks, and the government said at least one person was killed.

The demonstrations are the largest challenge to the military government since a failed pro-democracy uprising in 1988, during which thousands died.

The current protest began on Aug. 15, when the government decided to raise the cost of fuel, in turn pushing up prices of food and fuel across the economy. The demonstrations drew international attention when thousands of maroon-robed Buddhist monks took the lead.

Earlier in the week, the military government imposed a ban on gatherings of more than five people and deployed soldiers to enforce a nighttime curfew.

Monks leading the protest

In Yangon, the country's commercial capital (formerly called Rangoon), the monks marched from the sacred Sule Pagoda shrine to the city center holding their begging bowls upside down, symbolizing their refusal to receive alms from the government.

Thousands of civilians locked arms around the monks, forming a human chain. Demonstrators carried placards and banners that read "Better Living Conditions", "Release of Political Prisoners," and "May the Peoples' Desire Be Fulfilled."

Fearing a repeat of the bloodshed seen in 1988, world leaders, gathered in New York for the United Nations General Assembly, urged the government of Myanmar to exercise restraint in face of the protests.

President Bush announced a tightening of diplomatic and financial sanctions against the Myanmar government.

Deep-rooted opposition

Myanmar is a country of 47 million people located in Southeast Asia. Since 1962, the country has been ruled by a small group of military generals (a "junta"). The rulers changed the name from Burma to Myanmar, which is similar to the country's official name in Burmese, in 1989.

The period since then has been marked by severe economic decline and erosion of political rights. The junta has refused to recognize democratic elections and dissenters face arrest and torture.

During the 1988 uprising, demonstrators succeeded in overthrowing the military general Ne Win, but he was soon replaced by another general. An estimated 3,000 people lost their lives when the government retaliated against protesters.

The figurehead of the opposition is Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and daughter of the Burmese independence hero General Aung San. Suu Kyi has been under house arrest for twelve of the past eighteen years since the 1988 uprising.

The NLD won landslide elections in 1990, but Suu Kyi was not allowed to govern. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

Johns Hopkins University professor Bridget Welsh told the NewsHour that the opposition movement in the country was brought to a new level with the participation of the monks, who hold a revered position in Myanmar society.

"It's now because of their moral authority that ordinary people have felt comfortable coming in and joining these protests, from street children to ordinary bureaucrats, even those in the civil service," Welsh said.

The world watches

The battle of wills between Myanmar's two strongest institutions -- the monks and the military -- has left world leaders watching nervously to see what the government will do next.

Since Monday, Suu Kyi has been moved to a military prison -- a move which, along with the troop deployments, may be a step toward a broader military crackdown, similar to one that occurred in 1988. This time, however, the military regime is under intense international pressure to heed the protesters' demands.

"We are in uncharted territory," British Ambassador to Myanmar Mark Canning told the New York Times. "These demonstrations seem to be steadily picking up momentum. They are widely spread geographically. They are quite well organized, they are stimulated by genuine economic hardship and they are being done in a peaceful but very effective fashion."

-- Compiled by Christina Satkowski for NewsHour Extra

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