

## **Summary of Events in Burma, August 19-25, 2007**

### ***Introduction***

Over the past week, Rangoon has seen its most sustained and largest protests in a decade. On August 15, the ruling State Peace and Development Council dramatically raised fuel prices effectively doubling transport costs overnight. Already faced with severe difficulties because of rising commodity prices, ever-rising inflation (estimated at more than 40% this year), and lack of consistent electricity, hundreds of Rangoon residents came out to demonstrate in the streets of Rangoon, while hundreds of others cheered them on. Protests were also held in Mandalay and Magwe Divisions. The SPDC used various tactics to break up the protests, including intimidation and attacks against demonstrators by junta-backed groups, notably the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) and Swan-Aa-Shin (SAS). By the end of the week, over 100 activists had been arrested, and the authorities' search for other key leaders intensified with severe pressure on the activists' families. The international community has commented and expressed concern about the situation, but has not taken a single concrete action. Burmese activists are calling for the UN Secretary-General's Special Advisor on Myanmar, Dr. Ibrahim Gambari, to visit the country to negotiate a resolution to the political crisis; for the UN Security Council to give its full backing to this approach; and for the USDA to be disbanded.

### ***The Price Hike – Wednesday, August 15, 2007***

The government holds a monopoly on fuel sales and subsidizes them. On Wednesday, August 15 they doubled key fuel prices at state-owned gas stations without warning. The effect was immediate: sudden increases in bus fares left many urban workers who live in satellite towns unable to afford the costs of getting to their jobs; taxis and buses reduced services; several shopkeepers predicted that they would be forced to close because they use diesel to run generators amid the frequent blackouts; many university students must travel for their studies; rural farmers faced difficulties because they depend on fuel for irrigation, processing, and transportation of crops. By the end of the week, the ripple effect could also be seen: prices of food, clothing, and basic commodities increased significantly, and will likely continue to rise; the price of rice is up 10%, edible oils - 20%, meat - 15%, and garlic and eggs - 50%; a standard plate of noodles at a food stall tripled.

### ***The Protests***

#### **Friday, August 17, 2007**

Htin Kyaw of the Myanmar Development Committee (MDC) called for nationwide protests before going underground.

#### **Sunday, August 19, 2007**

Prominent leaders of the '88 Generation Student Group walked in solidarity with residents who could no longer afford transportation costs. The march started on a street in northern Rangoon with about 100 people and grew to over 500, covering nine kilometers and dispersing without incident, though authorities photographed and videotaped the protest. The National League of Democracy warned of more protests to come. On the same day, U Win Naing and colleagues donated rice to people on the outskirts of Rangoon, and members of the junta-backed *Swan-Aa-Shin (SAS)* attacked his car. Female leaders of the '88 Generation Student Group arrived on the

scene and helped those distributing rice and those receiving it to get away from the SAS without incident.

### **Monday, August 20, 2007**

A group of youths in the Tamwe area of Rangoon protested the fuel price hikes, and no intimidation or harassment by the authorities was reported. Narinjara News reported that 200 monks demonstrated in Thanlyin, Rangoon for not being allowed to venture outside at night. The protest lasted until 2 a.m. and ended peacefully.

### **Tuesday August 21, 2007**

Hundreds of people marched from the Shwe Baho Clinic in Rangoon's Tamwe Township to the NLD headquarters on Shwegondine Road. They were followed by men with slingshots and sticks who shouted abuse and threatened them. Others trying to join the protests were also threatened with being beaten to death. At two campuses of Rangoon University and at the Hlaing Tharyar bus station, activists distributed leaflets encouraging people to join the protests.

Word began to spread of a large, joint protest planned in front of City Hall for Thursday, August 23, with speeches planned by people from various walks of life.

Myo Khin, chairman of Yankin Township NLD branch and five other NLD members were accosted by 60 members of junta-backed Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) and SAS paramilitary, carrying catapults and sharpened bamboo sticks. After threatening to beat the NLD members, the USDA and SAS members forced the NLD members onto a bus (they had said they were simply walking because they could not afford transport costs), and they got off at the next stop.

Overnight, the SPDC arrested prominent leaders of the 88 Generation Students Group including Min Ko Naing, Min Zeya, Ko Ko Gyi, Kyaw Min Yu (a) Jimmy, Mya Aye, Htay Win Aung (a) Pyone Cho, and Ant Bwe Kyaw. State media announced that they were accused of attempting acts to disturb national security stability, implementation of the national convention and the roadmap process.

### **Wednesday, August 22, 2007**

The remaining prominent '88 Generation Student Group leader, Htay Kywe, gave an interview to Burmese exile media about the arrests and promised to continue supporting demonstrations against the price hike.

Another major demonstration was held, beginning in various sections of Rangoon and converging in Hlaedan. Estimates from activists on the scene put the total number of demonstrators at about 2,000 people, much higher than what was reported in the media. Prominent leaders included female 88 Generation Students Group leaders Nilar Thein, and Mi Mi and NLD leaders Naw Ohn Hla and Phyu Phyu Thin. Naw Ohn Hla, a former political prisoner, is well known for leading Tuesday prayers at Shwedagon Pagoda for Daw Aung Suu Kyi's release. Phyu Phyu thin is well known for her AIDS activism.

Security forces blocked the marchers from continuing on from Hlaedan and the crowd dispersed. At least seven people, including Naw Ohn Hla, were detained and later released.

Also on Wednesday, U Win Naing of the Myanmar Development Committee and 400 protesters march from the Hlaedan intersection toward Sule Pagoda in Rangoon, dispersing near Oakyin bus stop in Hlaing Township. Army trucks were stationed at City Hall, and USDA and SAS

members beat demonstrators, snatched cameras, and abducted many of them, putting them in cars to take away from the gatherings. Several people were injured, including children and monks. At least 100 people in various locations throughout the city.

Other demonstrations in other parts of Rangoon took place in South Dagon, San Pya Bazaar, and Anawrahta Road in Kyauktada Township.

#### **Thursday, August 23, 2007**

Phyu Phyu Thin led another demonstration of approximately 50 people in the Shwegondaing area. Protestors from South Dagon on the outskirts of Rangoon joined the Shwegondaing group, and the demonstration grew to about 200 people. As the SAS attacked the demonstrators, they formed a human chain by locking arms and a 30-minute standoff ensued. Finally, about 20 protestors were beaten and dragged away, but Phyu Phyu Thin escaped unharmed. Onlookers were ordered out of the area and reporters were roughed up by security personnel.

U Ohn Than staged a solo protest in front of American Center in Rangoon and was arrested. A small demonstration was also held at Sanpya Market in Thin-gan-gyun in Rangoon.

In the Yanan Chaung area in Magwe Division, demonstrations were held from 8 a.m. to 12 noon. The march began at Township Peace and Development committee office with 40 people, and grew to 60 people by the time it reached the main market and returned back to the TPDC office. The demonstration was monitored by police but was not disrupted. No USDA or SAS members were present. Also in Magwe, workers in Minbu (a center of petroleum production) were restricted from leaving work between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.

Later in the day, the residences of Htay Kywe, Hla Myo Naung, Nilar Thein, and Aye Aye Tun were raided and searched. Aye Aye Tun and Aung Kyaw Oo (brother of Htay Kywe) were detained overnight and released on Friday morning.

#### **Friday, August 24, 2007**

A planned protest in front of City Hall, gathering various smaller demonstrations that had been occurring all week, could not go forward. Approximately 20 people were arrested on Bogyoke Road near the railway office in efforts to keep the protest from taking place. 15 women were also detained near City Hall. Residences of about 40 activists were put under surveillance, and houses continued to be raided and searched. 70 activists' names were circulated to hotels, and hotel staffs were required to inform authorities if anyone with those or similar names tried to check in.

U Myint Aye, leader of Human Rights Defenders and Promoters was arrested leaving his house. Htay Kywe's picture was posted in local authorities' offices in different townships, and student leader Hla Myo Naung's house was surrounded. Despite the arrests and intimidation tactics, the 88 Generation Students Group announced that demonstrations will continue and intensify.

#### **Saturday, August 25, 2007**

Demonstrations spread outside of Rangoon. In Mogok, Mandalay Division, a demonstration of about 150 people was staged with no interference or arrests. Protestors marched from the central market to the state owned gas station. In Yenanchaung, Magwe Division, authorities blocked demonstrators' efforts to stage a protest, and tensions remained high.

Htin Kyaw of the Myanmar Development Committee was arrested at Thein-gyi market.

### ***General Information on Arrests and Attacks***

The USDA has hired laborers and unemployed people, paying incentives of 2,000 – 5,000 kyat (approximately US \$2-\$4) to intimidate and attack protestors. Recent legal analysis by the Burma Lawyers Council found that under the existing Criminal Procedure Code, USDA is an “unlawful association,” and called on the SPDC to declare it as such, stop its use of violence, and cease its criminal acts. Failure to do so, according to the BLC, is proof that the regime is using the USDA to violently crackdown on Burmese citizens exercising their right to freedom of expression. Woman leaders of the 88 Generation Students Group – particularly Nilar Thein and Mi Mi – have called on the USDA members to protect the dignity of the female protestors and join hands with them.

The thirteen '88 Generation Students Group leaders likely will be charged under Law 5/96 guarding against acts undermining efforts to successfully carry out peaceful transfer of State responsibilities and facilitate the proceedings of the National Convention. Under this law, a person can be sentenced up to 20 years if found guilty. All these leaders previously spent at least 10 years in prison before being release in 2004. They are believed to be held at Insein Prison. In total, over 100 activists have been arrested. A monetary reward has been announced for arrest of Htay Kywe.

### ***The International Response***

Demonstrations have been held around the world, including in Bangkok, Seoul, Kuala Lumpur, New Delhi, and London, calling not only on the SPDC to end its repression of the demonstrators, but calling also on the Chinese government not to block any action that might be demanded of the UN Security Council.

The United Nations Secretary-General, the European Union, the Asean Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC), Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Václav Havel, the Canadian Foreign Ministry, the United States government, the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the French Foreign Ministry, Human Rights Watch, and the Asian Human Rights Commission have issued statements either condemning the actions of the SPDC for detaining people exercising right to peaceful demonstrations and calling for their release, or otherwise expressing concern about the situation. What about the Irish, Danish, Swedish Amnesty International? While we welcome these statements, we urge the international community to back up these words with concrete action.

### ***A Call to the International Community to Back Up Its Words with Action***

Because the USDA is playing such a key role in the violence carried out against the demonstrators, we are calling on the international community to demand that the SPDC abolish the USDA under its “Unlawful Associations Act,” as it is a criminal organization under the regime’s control. If the SPDC refuses this demand, they should be held responsible for the violent acts and other crimes against the people committed by the USDA. **International governments, non-governmental organizations, and UN agencies should immediately cease any assistance or cooperation with the USDA.**

Before the protests began on August 19, 92 Members-elect of Parliament issued a statement calling for an alternative 7-step roadmap to national reconciliation and democratic transition in Burma. This statement was supported by the '88 Generation, The Government in Exile and the National Council of the Union of Burma. The current crisis in Burma demands the support of the international community for this initiative.

Htay Kywe made the following statement from hiding on behalf of the 88 Generation Students Group:

"..Many of us have already been arrested and it is evident that there is no security or rule of law in Burma. It's also very clear that there are political and economic hardships in Burma. We are endeavoring to assist the people of Burma to liberate themselves from the life they are living now. We believe that the international community is observing these developments. At this time we wish to extend our invitation to UN Special Envoy Mr. Gambari to visit Burma. Each and every citizen of Burma is a witness to the injustices and the acts of oppression taking place now. The problems today are associated not only with hikes in fuel oil prices, but also with the failure of the economic, administrative, and political systems. The people of Burma are now demonstrating that they want to see changes taking place".

To express your solidarity, **please write to your governments** (Ministries of Foreign Affairs and members of parliament) **to urge support for efforts to obtain UN Security Council backing for Dr. Gambari to visit Burma immediately and negotiate not only an end to the current crisis over the fuel hike and the arrests of demonstrators, but the ongoing political crisis that is at the heart of the problems in Burma.**