

Burma protesters give Govt deadline to quit

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Rangoon (Reuter) — Leaders of Burma's opposition yesterday threw their weight behind a student ultimatum that the country's socialist leaders turn over power to an interim government by tomorrow night.

"We have set Thursday for a whole-Burma general strike that will continue as long as necessary until democracy is peacefully achieved," said General Tin Oo, a leading opposition figure and former defence minister.

At a news conference in a heavily guarded warehouse in the city's port area, another opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of resistance hero Aung San, reaffirmed the student ultimatum to the government that it resign by the time of tomorrow night's news broadcast on Rangoon Radio.

She said that once Thursday's strike began it would not end until the government had fallen.

Oo attended her news conference as a display of unity.

The opposition wants an interim government to supervise multi-party elections.

The opposition leaders spoke during a day that saw 100,000 people from all levels of Burmese society take to the streets in an outpouring of anti-government feeling.

The demonstrators shouted for the immediate resignation of President Maung Maung and his Burma Socialist Programme Party.

Last week, student protest organisers set this coming Thursday for a climactic showdown with the government.

Among the monks, students, professionals and striking workers and civil servants who marched yesterday was a large contingent of women parading under the banner "Housewives Association of Rangoon". They banged pots and pans as they shouted for democracy.

Tin Oo and Western

diplomats spoke of violence erupting in some neighbourhoods.

"There is serious unrest in south Okkalapa that has been going on for the past 24 hours," one Western diplomat said.

Details of the unrest were not confirmed but the diplomat and Burmese sources said they had heard reports of killings of monks and students and revenge beatings by vigilantes.

Tin Oo said the violence had ended and the area was quiet last night.

Report and pictures: P.7

South Okkalapa, in the northeast of the city, saw some of the worst violence during clashes in August between soldiers and civilians. Doctors say 3,000 people died in Rangoon in four days of such violence last month.

Yesterday's demonstrators carried their own food and water instead of relying on public offerings because of the fear of being poisoned and vigilante groups continued to patrol to maintain a semblance of order.

A Western diplomat said he considered reliable one report that one man had been caught offering poisoned water to protesters. The report said the man died from cyanide poisoning when Buddhist monks forced him to drink the water he had offered.

While the demonstration was peaceful, jinglers — fearsome sharpened bicycle spokes — were selling briskly in the city's markets along with the catapults and slingshots with which they are fired.

Soldiers kept away from the line of march. Western diplomats said the army was building up its defences at several points in the city and avoiding confrontation with protesters.

Students and monks began leaving government offices and town halls in which they had set up impromptu civil administrations.

The government had warned them to leave or face dire consequences. They had refused to do so, but began to move out yesterday after Tin Oo and former Prime Minister U Nu, another opposition leader, asked them to try to avoid provoking the army into action.

Tin Oo and Aung San Suu Kyi said they had no personal political ambitions. Tin Oo said he might serve in an interim government if compelled and Aung San Suu Kyi also said she was willing to serve.

Maung Maung has pleaded for time to hold an emergency party congress on September 12 that would approve a referendum to let the people decide on Burma's political future. The opposition says this is just a delaying tactic.

"A very large number of people are ready to demonstrate (on Thursday). I can't imagine the military could stop it," one diplomat said.

The Burma Communist Party, which has been waging a guerrilla war against the Rangoon government for decades, issued a statement in Moreh, India, yesterday backing the creation of a multi-party system.

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BURMA



BRAVING THE RAIN: Hundreds of thousands of Burmese marched through monsoon showers in downtown Rangoon on Thursday, the day a national strike was called as part of protests against the military-backed socialist government.