

Airmen mutiny in Rangoon and join student protesters

BPSSCQ10

Rangoon (AP, Reuter) — About 200 uniformed air force men fled to a university campus and joined student leaders yesterday in the first major military defection to protesters seeking to topple the authoritarian system.

"We side with democracy and not with fascists" and "our military training is not to shoot people" the soldiers shouted inside Rangoon University, the headquarters for student revolt.

The unarmed soldiers, mostly sergeants and privates, sneaked out of Base 502 in the capital's Mingladon area, although they said the main gates were locked to prevent soldiers from leaving.

Base 502, the country's largest air force base, is about 15 miles (24 kilometres) north of downtown.

The first group of about 150 soldiers arrived at the campus about 6:30 a.m. and others arrived later in smaller groups. More were expected to join them.

The 200, in khaki uniforms and blue caps, were surrounded by a protective circle of students as they marched past wildly cheering citizens, a Western diplomat said.

He said the army had been ordered to shoot the airmen if they went past a certain point on Promé Road to join comrades at a hostel at Rangoon University.

At the point of confrontation, citizens went on their knees and begged the soldiers not to shoot.

The situation was "very serious

and tense", the diplomat said in a telephone interview, but eventually the soldiers stepped aside and let the airmen through.

There have been numerous reports of military defections but this was the first time a large group was seen in the capital defying the government and siding with protesters.

On Thursday, some sailors and a small number of soldiers joined hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in calling for the resignation of President Maung Maung and the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP).

There were many reports of defections from the government side in Rangoon and Mandalay, Burma's second city, on Friday, but they could not be confirmed with authoritative sources.

A diplomat in contact with Mandalay, to the north, said thousands upon thousands of people had taken to the streets of the former royal capital and were pleading with soldiers in a fort there to "come out and join us".

AS word of the parallel government circulated about 200 uniformed air force men fled to a university campus and joined student leaders Friday in the first major military defection to protesters seeking to topple the authoritarian system.

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Students were guarding the soldiers inside the dormitory for their protection.

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A diplomat cited reliable reports that in Rangoon and elsewhere, the army has been trying to seize all food, fuel, and other essential items to dig in for the long-term "and let the people starve."

On Thursday about one million people, including officials and intelligence officers, marched in Rangoon against the socialist government.

The protest was the largest since an estimated one million marched in Rangoon on August 24 in the biggest demonstrations since the 1962 military coup.

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