

Troops 'hold up bank in Rangoon'

Rangoon (AFP) — Burmese soldiers forced employees at a Rangoon bank to hand over \$100 million at gunpoint, bank workers said Thursday, but state radio denied the troops had used force to obtain the money.

"Elements of the army" broke into the Union Bank of Burma here on the night of August 25, threatened employees with weapons and forcibly withdrew 600 million kyats, a union of bank workers formed this week said in a statement.

Official radio denied late Thursday that the soldiers had used force in withdrawing the money, saying that the transaction had been carried out in a proper manner and according to bank procedures.

It said the money had been withdrawn to pay the salaries of members of the defence forces and the Ministry of Defence.

The bank workers also alleged that army personnel had withdrawn money from their accounts at the Union Bank of Burma using personal cheques without allowing bank staff to check whether the account was overdrawn.

The union of workers from the Union Bank of Burma, the Foreign Trade Bank and the State Commercial Bank of Burma said that because of the August 25 incident and fears of looting they were going on strike and closing the banks as of Thursday.

They said the banks would not re-open until Burma had achieved democracy.

They said they were closing the Foreign Trade Bank "to prevent some of the people in power from transferring their money abroad."

"We have the responsibility to protect the money of the people from being withdrawn by unscrupulous people," the union statement said.

"Since there is no other alternative, we have decided to close down the bank starting from today until further notice," it added.

They regretted that the closure of the banks would inconvenience "international organisations...who are involved in foreign exchange transactions."

The bank workers formed a temporary union earlier this week defying a ban on unions put in place by long-time ruler General Ne Win after he seized power in a military coup in 1962 and set up one-party rule.

GA/1988/10 L/0001