

# Burma monks foregoing alms amid food shortage

BUDDHIST monks have laid down their alms bowls to help alleviate a food shortage in Rangoon, gripped by daily street protests and strikes, residents and diplomats in the Burmese capital said.

"Instead of begging they are helping distribute food supplies which trickle in from the provinces. Buddhist temples have become distribution centres," a foreign resident told Reuters.

Buddhist monks use bowls to accept offerings from the public.

The resident said it was difficult to bring in food because transport was virtually paralysed by lack of fuel and strikes by railway workers.

Diplomats said that while there were no re-

ports of starvation, people were going hungry.

The problem has been compounded by the closure of banks and offices since the current wave of protests began in early August. With no money and no jobs, many daily wage earners are forced to rely on handouts from friends and relatives, Buddhist societies, monasteries, or voluntary worker and student groups.

Many embassies help their staff with food packets.

At the best of times, official statistics are hard to come by in secretive Burma. With the present unrest it is worse, and no one knows for sure the gravity of the food or fuel shortage.

Opposition leader Tin Oo said three or four steamers carrying rice from the delta region arrived in Rangoon on Wednesday. Students, monks and workers arranged distribution of the rice "at proper prices".

Diplomats said rice now costs three to four times more, while petrol was being sold on the blackmarket at 100 kyats per gallon (\$16 per 4.5 litres at the official exchange rate) compared with 3.5 kyats (60 cents) at government pumps before the troubles.

The official rate of exchange is six kyats to the dollar against 40 to the dollar on the black market.

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