

Life now a constant struggle in strife-torn Rangoon

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by Sein Win

Rangoon (AP) — A nationwide campaign for democracy has made daily life a constant struggle in the Burmese capital, where residents try to cope with trigger-happy soldiers and the spiraling price of the staple food, rice.

"I lived in Rangoon before (World War II), during the war and after the war up to now. This is the worst period in my life," said Aye Maung, about 65. "Life in Rangoon is now like hell."

Residents have heard gunfire every night — presumably soldiers fighting protesters — since military commander Gen Saw Maung seized power in Sunday's coup.



On Thursday night, shots were heard from the direction of the wharves along the Rangoon River, which curves around the southern end of the city of 3.5 million people.

With soldiers, looters and others roaming the lawless streets, residents have been cordoning off their homes, and few dare violate the 8 p.m. to 4 a.m. curfew.

Even in daytime, "people are afraid to go out for strolls," said one resident.

Life in Rangoon has been difficult since Gen Ne Win ended democracy in a 1962 coup and began a ruinous 26-year path along the "Burmese way to socialism."

Graceful buildings from the British colonial era have decayed from neglect,

the primitive transportation system was overtaxed and only a thriving black market kept the economy afloat. A United Nations report has described Rangoon as Asia's most rat-infested city. Ne Win resigned on July 23 after a wave of pro-democracy demonstrations. Three new leaders long associated with him have been named in the ensuing two months, but all have failed to quell the anti-government sentiment. A general strike since August 8 has closed most businesses and paralysed the government. Civil servants sympathetic to the protesters have stayed off the job. Residents who have gone weeks without a paycheck are preoccupied with

scraping together enough money for rice.

The price of a kilogramme of rice has jumped from 2 kyats in 1977 to 5 kyats in July to 15 kyats in recent days. The official exchange rate is 6 kyats to the US dollar, although the black-market rate is roughly seven times higher.

Perhaps more than half of Rangoon population has switched to rice porridge or sweet potatoes.

Petrol prices have shot up as refineries shut down and military and government departments stocked up. Virtually the only way to get petrol is through the black market. A gallon (3.8 litres) costs about 125 kyats (about US\$36), five times the price from just one month earlier.

Ironically, the capital's supply of electricity has become less erratic because government factories that are major users have been shut by the general strike.

All banks have been closed by strikes, so even the rich have problems getting by. Hawkers of black-market goods, who previously ran thriving businesses, have trouble getting customers even with big discounts. Other businessmen, such as small manufacturers and repairmen, also find there is no longer a market for non-essential goods and services.

"People don't come to repair their cars; there's no gasoline," an automobile mechanic named Chain said. "I had to terminate the services of my four

assistants. I tried to sell my car at any price because I need money, but nobody is buying. The car is now useless."

Only small roadside foodstalls seem to be doing some business.

Most popular forms of entertainment have disappeared. The usually packed downtown cinemas have been quiet since early August, when troops fired on demonstrators in the area, and large restaurants also are closed.

State-run radio and television has featured military songs and war documentaries since the coup, and popular US television programmes have been taken off the air.

However, some people say they will put up with the hardships in the struggle for democracy.

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