

Rangoon running out of cash

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Rangoon (AFP) — Food prices have started falling back after spiralling during two months of mass anti-government protests but this is little consolation to Rangoon residents running out of cash because banks have been closed for weeks.

Getting to a market is also a problem as petrol stations are still closed and the only fuel available is on the black market at high prices.

As a result, people face the prospect of spending enough money to feed a family of four for a day on a one-way bus journey.

"Hey, brother, we sell, we also buy, are you interested," a voice calls out as a car slows to manoeuvre around a tree trunk blocking half of the road, one of many remnants of makeshift roadblocks put up by anti-government

protesters that made travel by car practically impossible until four days ago.

The car pulls into a side lane to a makeshift "filling station" — a five-gallon (22 litres) plastic drum hidden behind a bush — and two precious gallons are siphoned into the tank.

The driver is 220 kyats (around US\$30 at the official rate, \$7 at the black market rate) the poorer after paying more than four times the going rate before strikes and mass protests began two

months ago, but can keep his vehicle on the road for at least one more day.

The official price is 3.5 kyats per gallon, but state-run petrol stations have been on strike and have not reopened despite appeals from the military junta, which seized power on September 19, for state employees to return to work.

The fuel shortage has been a key factor in the disruption of transport and communications in recent weeks, leading to spiralling food prices.

More food is now appearing in markets, some from looted warehouses, some brought in as the military junta moves to re-establish transport links and some from private hoards as people decide to sell for much-needed cash.

Cash has become a major problem for the Burmese capital's 2.7 million people as state bank employees are still on strike.

The small amount of money in circulation is being devoted to buying basic foodstuffs, with the result that it has become a buyers' market for non-vital items such as soap and toothpaste, which have more than halved in price.

Gold, the main indicator of money in circulation, is now quoted at half the price it was two months ago in Shwe Bon Tha Street, Burma's main gold exchange.

"Despite the huge fall in price there are only sellers, no buyers, because people have no money to buy," said one gold merchant.

The black market price of the dollar has plunged from almost 50 kyats before the unrest to around 30 kyats and is expected to fall even further.

Japanese detainees well-treated by Burma authorities

Mae Sot — Two Japanese freelance cameramen said here yesterday that they were well-treated after being detained by the Burmese military, on charges of illegally entering the country.

Naoki Mabuchi, 44, said that he and Shousuke Thaeuchi, 43, had crossed the border from Mae Sot in Thailand into eastern Burma on September 12.

They were picked up by the army on September 17 on charges of illegally entering the country while they were with a group of students and other anti-government protesters, Mabuchi said.

He said he believed that the group had been infiltrated by a military informer who had told the army of their presence.

The two were detained the day before the military seized power in Burma.

They were held in a police station compound at Pa-an in Burma's eastern Karen state until Saturday, when they were brought to Moei river bordering Thailand under military escort and sent across by boat, Mabuchi said.

"The Burmese police and soldiers treated us very well," Mabuchi said.

"We were never handcuffed or locked in a cell; just confined in the police station compound, and spent much of the time playing football with the policemen," he said. Their cameras were returned before they left, but the film had been removed.

Burma stopped issuing tourist visas to foreign nationals in August.

The two Japanese cameramen are now under arrest again for illegal entry, this time in Thailand. — AFP

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