

BURMA: 2007 PROTESTS AGAINST FUEL PRICES



**A collection of statements and urgent appeals issued on
the protests against increased fuel prices in Burma**

by the Asian Human Rights Commission
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International community is failing the people of Myanmar again

(A statement from the Asian Legal Resource Centre, a sister organization of the AHRC, to be presented in the 6th session of the Human Rights Council from 10 to 28 September 2007)

1. On 15 August 2007, the Government of Myanmar increased the cost of all vehicle and generator fuels, over which it holds a monopoly, without prior announcement. As has been widely reported in the international media, the price of diesel fuel was doubled; compressed natural gas, which is used for some vehicles and cookers, was increased five-fold. The increased prices had a quick knock-on effect to other basic services and commodities: buses increased fares in line with the new rates immediately. Within a week the prices of food in the former capital Yangon, including rice, salt, beans and cooking oil, had increased by four to 18 per cent. As millions of people in the country are already at subsistence level, and given that the inflation rate had been running at some 40 per cent even prior to the increase, it is set to cause serious hardship to vast numbers of people and will likely exacerbate undernourishment and mortality rates among the most vulnerable groups.

2. Despite the heavy control that the military government continues to exert over all areas of public life in Myanmar, within days protests began against the price increases. Starting from August 19, throughout the following week there were marches in Yangon on nearly every day. These and similar actions spread to other parts of the country, including Mandalay, Ayeyarwaddy, Magwe and Bago Divisions, and Rakhine State. The protestors on each occasion have walked peacefully, initially not even making any demands; rather, just going from one side of town to the other to point out that they no longer have the money with which to pay for bus fares. Later they made calls for the price increase to be reversed.

3. However, for the Government of Myanmar even this much proved intolerable. It quickly organised a plainclothes operation to quash the demonstrations. Unlike in earlier years, when it simply deployed soldiers on to the streets, it has now devised strategies that instead use a combination of out of uniform Special Branch police and army intelligence officers together with township and ward council officials and quasi-government Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) executives coordinating the operations, and with USDA members, plainclothes soldiers and police, firefighters and municipal security personnel, and gangs of thugs acting as muscle. The last, loosely referred to as Swan-arshin, consist in part of persons recruited through the township councils from local merchants and others who must obtain permits for their livelihoods and are thus obliged to comply with official demands, and in part at times unemployed youth and others rounded up from teashops and other public areas with the offer of a day's wages and a meal. They are entirely mobilised and controlled by the military regime and are not simply "pro-government" gangs, as described in some reports. An army officer identified as Colonel Than Han together with USDA secretary U Aung Thaung have allegedly run the entire operation. Col. Than Han is said to have been behind the lethal attack on a convoy carrying Nobel Peace Prize laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters at Depayin in 2003.

4. From the night of August 21, the members of this operation began taking into custody and interrogating the leaders of the protests, and searching houses and other premises. At time of writing, over 100 persons are reportedly being held. The manner in which persons have been

taken and detained has been entirely outside of not only international legal standards but also domestic law. Indeed, the state-run media has not referred to the making of arrests but to the “taking, holding, interrogating and investigating” of these persons.

5. The arrest of Ko Htin Kyaw and Ko Zaw Nyunt on August 25, which was captured on video, is illustrative. The two, who went to protest outside the Theingyi Market in downtown Yangon, were literally dragged away to a waiting vehicle by a gang of unidentifiable abductors. They were also reportedly assaulted, as was Ko Thein Myint, who was publicly punched while being brought in by a Special Branch officer. Others have been taken from public transport, as in the case of Ko Nyunt Win and Ko Saw Lwin on August 24, or nearby their houses, as in the case of the leader of the Human Rights Defenders and Promoters group, U Myint Aye, who was also picked up that day while taking food cooked in celebration of his wife’s birthday to his in-laws. Since July seven other members of his group, which educates local people on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and only those international laws to which Myanmar is a state party—notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women—have also been given lengthy jail terms by virtue of these activities.

6. In view of the dramatic effects that the fuel price increase will necessarily have on the living standards of already impoverished people throughout Myanmar, as well as the exceptional nature of the recent protests under extraordinarily pressing conditions, and given the patently lawless manner in which the subsequent crackdown and sweeping detentions have been conducted, the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) had confidently expected a strong and concerted response from the international community, not least of all key United Nations mechanisms and agencies, including the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

7. Thus, the ALRC was surprised by the meek and belated reactions from both the office of the Secretary General and the High Commissioner. For his part, the Secretary General on August 23 briefly remarked through a spokesperson that the events were of concern, and called for “all parties to avoid provocative action” and instead to engage in “constructive dialogue”. The High Commissioner on August 26 shared in his concern and with equal brevity called for the release of protest leaders and for the government to “engage in consultation and dialogue with the demonstrators”. To the knowledge of the ALRC, none of the relevant special mechanisms under the Human Rights Council formally said or did anything concerning any of these events, although the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar made some short comments via radio expressing his dissatisfaction with the turn of affairs and likewise calling for the release of the detainees.

8. Neither of the statements by either the Secretary General or the High Commissioner is of any use to the people of Myanmar, first because they deny reality and second because they do not hold any hope for meaningful and sustained international interest in the pressing conditions under which they are being forced to live. They deny reality by pretending that “constructive dialogue” is something that is realistically possible with the Government of Myanmar on matters of human rights and democratisation, when it is painfully clear that the military regime has no interest in such dialogue other than for the purpose of extending its uncompromising grip on power. Indeed, contrary to how they are intended, such statements are a source of great succour to this government—rather than its long-suffering people—as it has heard them and used them for many years now to its advantage. It knows that in making such remarks, the international community has no serious intentions and that sustained international attention and serious intervention will not be forthcoming.

9. One of the reasons that neither the Secretary General nor High Commissioner—or any of the special procedures—has anything much to say or do about what has happened in Myanmar in recent weeks is that none of them actually know anything much about the country. The sad fact is that despite the presence of a Special Rapporteur under the Human Rights Council, a Special Envoy of the Secretary General, and in-country offices of a range of United Nations agencies, policymakers in the international system are uninformed about how the state operates, how its people deal with it, and how to approach it effectively for change. Thus, they are unable to do anything because they don't know anything. In part this is because the administration remains strongly resistant to outside scrutiny. But in part too it is due to a lack of effort. There are many persons in the United Nations and other multilateral agencies and related bodies with sufficient expertise and interest to be able to assist key persons in the organisation to build up a body of effective knowledge upon which concerted, directed strategies could be devised. There are also one or two international agencies, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), that have demonstrated how persistent work and determined international pressure can have some effect on the Government of Myanmar. But for the most part sustained, engaged and comprehensive work of this sort has not been done. As a consequence, some 17 years after the military last rejected election results, most international discussion on Myanmar remains rudimentary.

10. People throughout Myanmar are acutely aware of any sort of international interest in, and support for, their struggle for basic human rights. Yet time and again they have been let down by the global community. Whereas in the past it could be said that “we didn't know”, there is no such excuse today. In this age of multiplying new technology for fast communication, even news of an isolated event in Myanmar can be obtained relatively quickly and reported throughout the world. Footage and photographs of protestors on the streets have been available across the Internet within 24 hours of taking place. So it has not been for lack of awareness or efforts on their part that people in Myanmar have again been failed. Instead, what has this time caused the failure to make prompt and useful interventions is the paucity of serious thought about Myanmar at the top echelons of the United Nations structure, including in the Human Rights Council. It is this thinking failure, not infrastructure or information failure, that must be addressed if the council and other parts of the organisation are to effect any sort of change that may lead to enjoyment of human rights in Myanmar any time soon.

11. Accordingly, the Asian Legal Resource Centre calls for the Human Rights Council together with the High Commissioner to spearhead an initiative to establish a special study and strategy group on Myanmar. The group could be set up without delay and as its first task explore the circumstances and consequences of the recent price increases and subsequent protests and detentions with a view to making a precise set of recommendations for short-term coordinated action among special mechanisms, in cooperation with other parts of the United Nations system, and present this to the council by its next session. In order to do this, the group should immediately meet with persons and agencies that have been working on the ground in Myanmar and are familiar with the operations of its government and living conditions of its people: including serving and former personnel of the ILO, United Nations Children's Fund, International Committee of the Red Cross, and development workers, academics and others with specialised local knowledge, not diplomatic credentials. While obtaining advice with which to recommend immediate measures, the group should simultaneously generate ideas on how to explore and prepare longer-term strategies to address the deep institutional obstacles to change in Myanmar through knowledgeable and considered planning that will demonstrate an unequivocal commitment to the well-being of people there, in marked contrast to the lacklustre and disinterested performance of these past few weeks. It is this sort of intervention that Myanmar must have, and which its people are literally dying for, if any intervention is to be had at all.

What will it take for the UN to act?

AS-206-2007, 29 August 2007

To the surprise of many, the protests against sharp fuel rises in Burma have continued for a second week, despite constant arrests and harassment of demonstrators and their leaders by plain-clothed police, government officials and gangs of thugs mobilised for the purpose, while soldiers are reported to be watching and waiting in the wings in case events prove uncontrollable.

The protests have now spread to parts of at least six out of the country's 14 states and divisions, and for the first time members of the Buddhist monastic order have come out in force: over 150 monks and novices marched in the capital of the western Arakan State on 28 August 2007, joined by another 50 to a hundred ordinary citizens. Fittingly, they chose to walk along U Ottama Street, named after a monk from the region who led the struggle against British colonial rule and was imprisoned with hard labour for three years as a consequence.

Meanwhile, another 500 persons marched peacefully across Pegu, north of Rangoon, where further sporadic protests that were held outside of market places in downtown and suburban areas were met with violence and persons were taken away in the by now omnipresent Dyna flat-back trucks that are being used in lieu of vehicles with official markings. Courageous individuals have video taped many of the marches and abductions of participants, and have sent the images abroad for the world to see.

What can no longer be denied is that there is in this the spark that could ignite another mass uprising against Burma's atrocious military regime. As virtually all of the leaders from the initial protests after the unannounced August 15 price hike are now in illegal detention, it is clear that the continued rallies are not being organised through any one group or body of leaders but rather are an expression of deep and swelling resentment at the army government. The marches in Sittwe and Pegu in particular were organised by local monks and ordinary citizens and did not apparently include among them any of the prominent leaders from the 1988 generation who began walking in Rangoon on August 19, or their allies.

Persons who have so far denied that the current protests bear a resemblance to those of 1988 also appear to have forgotten that the mass demonstrations of that year did not happen overnight: on the contrary, they slowly built up over a period of about six months, and were spread over about a further five months before being crushed through the use of undisguised sheer brutality of an unexceptional scale.

One of the differences between then and now is the capacity for news to be spread outside and inside the country with unprecedented speed and coverage. Every small incident is known to persons outside of Burma within hours of it taking place, and is soon broadcast back into the country via the short wave radio services that keep the population informed of what their government does not wish them to hear. These same services report in detail on the reaction of the international community, and reports of strong interest from abroad serve to galvanise the spirit and efforts of people there.

Unfortunately, the world leaders who speak so often about democracy and human rights appear not to understand this. Since its open letter of August 24 calling on the Secretary General of the United Nations to take intervene in the worsening situation in Burma, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has received messages from people in all parts of the world asking why the UN has so far sat on its hands.

The AHRC is asking the same question: ironically, the fleeting expressions of concern by the Secretary General and High Commissioner for Human Rights about the current situation in Burma have served no purpose other than to give further confidence to its dictatorship. It has heard such remarks countless times before and will no doubt be reassured that yet again empty rhetoric is all that the United Nations has to offer its fifty million long-suffering people. And not only the UN but also other multilateral agencies, notably the European Union, deserve criticism for the complete lack of timely and meaningful intervention at this critical time.

The Asian Human Rights Commission iterates its call for firm and deliberate action by the United Nations on Burma: now, today. It proposes that the Secretary General and High Commissioner each call urgent strategy meetings with concerned personnel and informed advisers--not merely persons with diplomatic credentials but those who know what is actually going on in the country--to discuss and propose immediate steps. It also echoes calls for an emergency session of the Security Council to be held on the same, as the consequences of the recent hikes in prices will under any circumstances have ramifications for the region.

Finally, the AHRC earnestly calls upon concerned fellow members of the public everywhere to lobby their governments to act, before it is again too little, too late for Burma. It is confident of the genuine interest in their wellbeing among other ordinary persons throughout the world, and is convinced that if the global popular outrage at what is happening there today can be translated into strong demands upon representative governments for a unified and coherent response to these events then this will make a big difference: in fact, it could be the difference between survival and disaster for the people of Burma.

Despite over 100 arrests, protests continue; still no action by UN

UP-114-2006, 29 August 2007

Despite great personal risks, people in Burma are continuing to come on to the streets in protest two weeks after the military regime there suddenly multiplied the cost of fuels without prior warning. Since the appeal issued by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) on August 26 ([UA-260-2006](#)), daily demonstrations have spread across the country. The latest have also involved Buddhist monks, which is a signal that the demonstrations could further escalate. Meanwhile, there are now at least 100 persons in illegal custody and yet still the United Nations has done nothing to respond to the situation.

As the AHRC already reported in its [previous appeal](#) and in other releases ([AS-197-2007](#); [AHRC-OL-028-2007](#); [AS-201-2007](#); [AS-206-2007](#)), since 19 August 2007 there have been almost daily demonstrations against the sudden multiplication of costs of fuels by the government on August 15, which is bound to cause enormous hardship to the country's already impoverished population.

In our first appeal on these dramatic events, we gave details of some of the 65 persons taken into illegal custody, many by unidentified men on the streets of Rangoon and other towns. In this update we include as an annex a list of 100 persons arrested between August 21 and 25 that was issued by the Political Defiance Committee (PDC), based in Thailand. Although some persons on the list are known to have been released since, many have not, and many others have since been arrested. Thus, we are forwarding the list without amendments at this stage. The total number of persons in detention at time of writing is not known. Other developments are as follows.

PROTEST BY MONKS IN THE WEST

On August 28 over 150 members of the Buddhist clergy led a protest through Sittwe, the capital of Arakan Division, on the western coastline of Burma bordering with Bangladesh. The group, which included monks and novices and was spontaneously joined by up to 100 members of the public as it marched through town shouting demands that the price of fuel be dropped back to its previous level and all persons detained since the protests started be released, while being closely monitored by police.

PROTEST NORTH OF RANGOON

Around 50 persons starting marching through the centre of Pegu town, north of Rangoon around 9am on the morning of August 28, from the Rangoon-Pegu road, moving eastwards to the historic Shwemawdaw Pagoda and back to the highway. Along the way they were greeted by onlookers with applause and gifts of snacks and drinks, and their numbers swelled to over 500. As they were returning, they were met by a township council chairman who called the leaders to his office and warned them against further demonstrations and then required them to sign documents promising that they wouldn't make any more trouble. However, they have said that they will continue with their actions despite having had to sign the pledges.

ONGOING PROTESTS IN RANGOON

Protests continued to be held in Rangoon under very tight security: plainclothes officers, council officials and gang members have been posted at major intersections and markets to stop rallies as soon as they start and bundle the participants into waiting Dyna flat-top trucks.

On August 28, protests were held at markets and central areas in Hledan, Tamwe and Kamayut. At Hledan, the protest by some 70 persons in early afternoon was led by international human rights prize laureate Ma Su Su Nwe (<http://campaigns.ahrchk.net/susunwe/>). She and some colleagues escaped an attempt to grab them but ten other persons were reportedly taken away. The ten have been identified as Kyaw Soe Win, San Win and Thant Zin from Hlaingthayar Township; Hla Naing from Insein; Nay Tun for Paungtal; Ye Thin Naing from Chauk and Bo Bo Win Hlaing from Dawbone, plus three onlookers.

Photographs are available on the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) website:
<http://english.dvb.no/photo1.php>

The AHRC has also obtained some new video of the protest from the DVB which clearly shows protestors being brutally assaulted by unidentified assailants which will be placed on the radio station's website shortly.

At Tamwe five persons were reportedly arrested for protesting near the market around 2pm.

REPORTS OF OTHER RECENT ARRESTS

According to DVB, on the night of August 27 the authorities took people from houses in Saku town, Magwe Division, west of Mandalay. Fourteen persons were taken away and four later released; the whereabouts of the other 10 are still unknown.

At time of writing, there are unconfirmed reports of new protests in Sittwe and in Mandalay, upper Burma.

"Arrest" in Rangoon epitomises lawlessness of a country

AS-201-2007, 27 August 2007

The Democratic Voice of Burma radio has posted a video on its website that vividly illustrates the true nature of the recent "arrest" of protestors against the price hikes in fuels there. The footage, shot by an unidentified person at around 1pm on 25 August 2007, shows at least six unidentified plain-clothed men carrying protest leader Ko Htin Kyaw struggling as he is literally lugged away and bundled into a waiting vehicle in the centre of downtown Rangoon, within sight of the famous Sule Pagoda. The video can be viewed at: <http://dvh.cachefly.net/tv/all/htinkyaw.wmv>

The film shows the undeniable reality that "arrest" in Burma today is nothing other than state-sponsored abduction. Htin Kyaw and another man, Ko Zaw Nyunt, had together been standing peacefully outside the Theingyi market when they were taken. Had the authorities wished, they could have sent uniformed police officers to make an arrest under any of the terms set down in section 54 of the country's Criminal Procedure Code and taken the two men on foot to the nearest police station. Instead, an unknown gang, presumably consisting of ununiformed Special Branch police but perhaps also comprising of other persons--such as members of the army, quasi-government agencies, local councils and gangs organised by the state--came out of nowhere to grab and drag off their quarry in the manner of criminals.

The apprehension of Ko Htin Kyaw epitomises the lawlessness that is Burma today. The Asian Human Rights Commission has for some time raised and demonstrated through numerous detailed cases how, quite apart from its completely empty rhetoric about democratisation and human rights, the military regime there cannot even claim to subscribe to the tenets of its own "law and order" agenda. Burma is neither a country of law nor order. Contrary to the exterior image, it is a country whose population--from the daily wage earners of the rundown industrial zones at its centre to the villagers hiding in the jungles of its hinterlands--is subjected to relentless, arbitrary violence and bullying, sometimes by known and identifiable others, but often by nameless, unknowable assailants and their abettors.

Regrettably, the international community has responded to the recent wave of protest with deafening silence. Despite the risks to their lives and liberty taken not only by the protestors but also by the persons documenting and sending audio and video footage and written details abroad, the reaction of the United Nations has been non-existent. The European Union, normally a staunch and vocal supporter of human rights in the country, has been little better: three short paragraphs from the presidency on August 25 condemned the arrests but did not indicate that the union would do anything more. Only the representatives of a few individual governments have spoken out more strongly, but again given no indication of any pending action.

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The blatant and violent abduction of Htin Kyaw and Zaw Nyunt from the street in Rangoon cannot be denied. The global community also cannot afford to ignore it. Every one of those concerned international officials should take a long hard look at this footage and then ask themselves what sort of "arrests" they are "concerned" about. They must cease to pretend that they are dealing with a government with whom "constructive dialogue" can be had on "mutual engagement" and devise more determined strategies to support the efforts of people in Burma themselves to see international standards of law and rights given meaning in their country, with or without the acquiescence of the state.

At least 65 persons reported arrested over protests against fuel prices

UA-260-2006, 26 August 2007

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has been following closely events in Burma since the government multiplied the cost of fuels there without warning over a week ago, prompting public protests. Latest reports from many sources indicate that at least 65 persons have now been taken into custody in connection with the demonstrations. The AHRC is calling for a much stronger response from the United Nations to this critical situation.

As has been widely reported in international news, on 15 August 2007 the government in Burma unexpectedly and dramatically increased the costs of vehicle fuels from two-thirds to five-fold, spurring immediate increases in public transport fares and also causing rises in other prices: in the former capital, Rangoon, the cost of staple food items, including rice, beans and oil, quickly increased from four to 18 per cent.

As most people in Burma are already living in or close to poverty, the price rises have sparked public protests on nearly every day since August 19, in which members of the public have walked peacefully through the streets. On August 24 further demonstrations were reported in Rangoon and in Mogoke, in Mandalay Division, upper Burma.

Some video footage of the protests is available on You Tube; for instance at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvm_rhfYovQ.

Government-organised gangs, referred to as Swan-arshin, and members of the quasi-official Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) have broken up most of the protests and detained participants (see below for background information).

Since August 21 the authorities have been coming to houses and other places and arresting the leaders of the protests. On August 22 the state media reported that 13 persons belonging to the 88 Generation Students Group were arrested. The 13 are being held at the central prison, awaiting charges. They are out of at least 65 persons currently said to be detained and interrogated. Some of the recent arrestees include the following persons:

1. **U Myint Aye**, the leader of the Human Rights and Promoters and Defenders group: taken by township council officials and Special Branch police from near his house in Rangoon on the morning of August 24. In the last month, seven other persons connected with the group have been imprisoned (see: [UP-108-2007](#); [UP-105-2007](#); [AHRC-OL-025-2007](#)).

2. **Ko Htin Kyaw**, the leader of the Myanmar Development Committee: arrested with another member of his group, Ko Zaw Nyunt, a few minutes into demonstrating in Rangoon during the afternoon of August 25. The two men were assaulted. Htin Kyaw and his colleagues had organised protests against rising prices earlier in the year but had been released after interrogation and "re-education".

3. Solo protestors **U Ohn Than** and **Aye Win**: Ohn Than was arrested outside the US embassy on 23 August 2007. He had in the past staged a number of similar protests and been jailed repeatedly. Aye Win was arrested in Bassein, Irrawaddy Division on August 24 for protesting

outside the main market. Both had been holding placards decrying the increased fuel prices. Aye Win was reportedly taken to the local police station on a motorcycle, during which time he continued to wave his protest sign to the interest and amusement of onlookers, as it appeared as if the police were helping him to demonstrate. Aye Win also had previously been jailed for two years after the lethal attack on a convoy of democracy proponents in Depayin during 2003 (see: [report by the Asian Legal Resource Centre](#)).

Other persons reportedly arrested on August 24 include National League for Democracy (NLD) members Ko Thein Myint, who was punched while being arrested by a Special Branch officer; Ko Nyunt Win and Ko Saw Lwin, taken from a public bus by USDA members and fire brigade personnel; and Ko Aung Zaw, taken from his house also by USDA and fire brigade personnel.

There are also reports and photographs being circulated of vehicles parked around central areas of Rangoon to be used to make any arrests the instant that protests occur. Other persons are still being sought out by the authorities and have gone into hiding. Warrants for arrest with photographs are said to be posted at the airport.

See further the earlier statement and open letter issued by the AHRC on the protests: [AS-197-2007](#); [AHRC-OL-028-2007](#).

So also a commentary on UPI Asia Online: [Milking the cow dry in Burma](#).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

It is important to note that the gangs of Swan-arshin are assaulting protestors and making illegal arrests under the guidance of local council officials, special branch police and army officials who are wearing plain clothes: they are not "pro-government" gangs as described in many international media reports, as this description suggests that the participants have organised autonomously. The gang members are organised through local traders whose livelihoods depend on cooperation with government officials, or in some cases reportedly on short notice by officials going and rounding up unemployed men from poor urban areas with the promise of a meal and some money.

For examples of other recent cases involving the Swan-arshin and USDA, see further: [UA-230-2007](#); [UA-096-2007](#); see also statements by the AHRC--[AS-173-2007](#) and [AS-125-2007](#)--and related comment on UPI Asia Online: [If you can't beat them, beat them up](#).

The fire brigade is also used in Burma as a proxy security force: see for instance, the killing case of Ko Thet Naing Oo in 2006 by fire brigade personnel and municipal security: [UA-097-2006](#).

According to a report by Democratic Voice of Burma radio, the anti-protests crackdown is being coordinated by an army officer, Colonel Than Han, together with USDA secretary, U Aung Thaug. Col. Than Han is reportedly the officer who was responsible for coordinating the 2003 Depayin massacre and clean-up operations (see report: <http://www.article2.org/pdf/v02n06.pdf>).

People of Myanmar deserve far more from UN than trivial and belated comments

AHRC-OL-028-2007, 24 August 2007

An Open Letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations by the Asian Human Rights Commission

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is writing to you with regards to your statement of 23 August 2007 concerning the consequences of the August 15 increase to fuel prices in Myanmar (Burma) and repeated protests in the former capital that are now reported to be spreading to other parts of the country.

The AHRC is surprised that it took your office over one week to release a statement on these dramatic developments in the tightly-controlled country. And while welcoming any movement from the international community on what is now happening in Myanmar, it is also nonetheless highly disappointed at the piecemeal and trivial contents of the short paragraph attributed to you, which show a lack of understanding of the real issues and immense problems faced by the people there.

First, you express concern that arrests have been carried out by "the authorities". In fact, most of the protests are being blocked and persons taken away by gangs of thugs mobilised as proxies for the police and military. These are not "pro-government" groups as reported in many news items over the last few days and nor do they have any legal basis. They are an unofficial arm of the state that has been systematically organised through township and ward councils and the government's mass body, the Union Solidarity and Development Association, for some years now, including for the purposes of the lethal attack on a convoy carrying the opposition party leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters at Depayin in 2003. They have been used repeatedly throughout this year to break up silent prayer vigils and similar peaceful actions by concerned citizens, of which the AHRC and other organisations have also already repeatedly informed the relevant special procedures under the UN Human Rights Council.

Secondly, you encourage "all parties to avoid any provocative action". In fact, this is an offensive and completely inappropriate remark. Was the unannounced doubling in charges of diesel fuel and quintupling of those for compressed natural gas--which you don't even mention in the statement--not an enormous provocation of millions in Myanmar who for years have been struggling to survive day by day? And while your comment can be construed as a diplomatically-worded warning for the military not to use unnecessary force in dealing with the protestors, it also tantamount to implying that for their part, members of the general public who feel aggrieved by the price increases should not do anything to cause the authorities to take to the use of arms.

To this we must ask, if not protest then what should the people of Myanmar do? Would you have them wait patiently for the sort of "constructive dialogue towards national reconciliation" that you have your special envoy engaged in at present? In short, do you deny them the right to take to the streets and assert that they won't be parties to their own impoverishment and degradation any longer? Are they not able to decide for themselves the about the dangers that they face--dangers that they know much better than you or I--and act accordingly?

Thirdly, the notion of "constructive dialogue" is anyhow spurious. Surprisingly, the United Nations continues to pretend that such a thing exists in dealing with the Government of Myanmar,

perhaps for want of anything else. The current government there has used the pretext of constructive dialogue to hold power against the will of its people for almost two decades. For how much longer can the UN afford to go along with this version of discourse? Even the Association of South East Asian Nations, which once championed this concept in dealings with Myanmar, has quietly backed away from it in recent years. Furthermore, the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Jakob Kellenberger, in June himself pointed out that the committee's operations have come to a complete standstill in the country because, "Despite repeated entreaties by the ICRC, the authorities have consistently refused to enter into a serious discussion..." He added that,

"The organization uses confidential and bilateral dialogue as its preferred means of achieving results. However, this presupposes that parties to a conflict are willing to enter into a serious discussion and take into account the ICRC's recommendations. This has not been the case with the authorities of Myanmar and that is why the ICRC has decided to speak out publicly." (Underline added)

The AHRC recalls the valuable role that the United Nations played and continues to play in dealing with the intense humanitarian and political crisis in Nepal, which helped to break the military's stranglehold on the country and open the way for the many difficult steps that it is continuing to take towards a new future. It asks: why has the international community failed to offer the same sorts of strenuous effort towards breaking that of the army over Myanmar? Why has the country obtained so little serious attention and quality thinking from UN institutions? Why is it that after a remarkable week in which people in Burma have taken to the streets in the sincere hope of support and interest from abroad they have obtained only three sentences from the UN Secretary General, through a spokesperson?--a shockingly inadequate response that borders on an insult to people who are risking their lives and liberties to bring their country at last into the 21st century global community.

Accordingly, the Asian Human Rights Commission urges you to do much more than follow events closely and with concern and issue nicely-phrased observations. Please immediately convene a special meeting with your special envoy on Myanmar, the UN Undersecretary-General for Political Affairs, and concerned and informed persons from inside and outside the UN system to assess the current situation and propose specific responses and strategies. Please also consider how the question of Myanmar can again be brought before the Security Council, where it has already been in recent times, with more effect on this occasion. Without your firm resolve, the people of Myanmar will again find themselves forced to struggle alone, as they have on so many occasions in the past.

Dramatic price rises, protests and arrests oblige international response

AS-197-2007, 22 August 2007

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has been following with deep concern and interest the tense situation in Burma since last Wednesday, 15 August 2007, when the military government dramatically increased the costs of all vehicle fuels by up to five times the previous level, without prior announcement. The price increases were immediately passed on to passengers on public transport and shortly thereafter the prices of basic food items, including rice, salt and oil, also began to shoot up.

The increasing costs will be incredibly difficult for millions in the country to bear. The majority of people in Burma are already living from day to day, and countless numbers in rural areas are just a step away from starvation. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in June took the remarkable step of publicly chastising the regime for the "immense suffering" it is causing to people in outlying regions. Even in towns and cities, ordinary persons are finding it harder and harder to scrape together a living. Millions more have gone to Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the high seas to earn any kind of wage under whatever terms and conditions offered.

So it is not surprising that despite the risks, people have quickly started going to the streets in protest. On August 19 around 500 persons marched some nine kilometres through Rangoon to demand that the price increases be revoked. On August 21 some hundreds more marched, and were this time met by members of the government-organised Swan-arshin: gangs of thugs armed with sticks and slingshots acting as proxies for the security forces, about which the AHRC has raised the alarm in a number of recent statements and appeals. As on the previous occasion, plainclothes police and intelligence officers stood on the sidelines and took photographs and video footage of the marchers.

On the night of August 21, dozens of persons who had led the protests were reportedly arrested at their houses. Many are veterans of the historic 1988 uprising who had been released from prison only in recent years. According to an article in the state media that appeared to have been written even before or during the operation, they had been taken into custody and were being interrogated for attempting to disrupt the national convention to write a new constitution, which has been running since 1994. Perversely, the article blamed the detainees for provoking the public by "taking advantage" of the increased fuel prices. Meanwhile, special branch police were reportedly waiting outside the houses of other persons to arrest them if they attempted to go on the streets.

But in a sign of the extent to which the government has forced its people into a showdown despite the arrests, a further protest went ahead as planned today, August 22. According to reports coming in from Rangoon, a group of at least 300, most women, again marched for two hours before being blocked around midday local time by Swan-arshin, who forced seven of them into vehicles and drove them away. Again the demonstrators were reportedly met by cheers and applause from onlookers. Two Buddhist monks involved in the protests were also said to have been forced into a vehicle and driven away from a separate location.

According to a separate item on the Delhi-based Mizzima news website, a previously unknown group has warned that the price hike is part of a deliberate strategy by the regime to provoke a confrontation with the public and launch a new crackdown. The group reportedly warned people not to fall into a trap by protesting.

But when people's day-to-day lives are so grievously affected by the actions of the state as in Burma today, what are they to do if not protest? How much longer are they supposed to bear its iniquities? What should they do instead? The extent to which the demonstrators' courageous steps are the surface manifestation of far-reaching and deep anger and frustration can be seen by the waving, cheering and tooting car horns in support by passers-by, despite the presence of intelligence and security officials. Indeed, from the accounts of onlookers, many if not most of the protestors have not been hardened activists but ordinary persons who have seen the others walking and spontaneously joined.

The AHRC has since the 1990s pointed to the direct links between Burma's militarisation and its impoverishment. Today it is more militarised and impoverished than ever. It is also probably closer to the sort of conditions that existed prior to the 1988 uprising than at any other time in the last decade. Whether or not the army has a strategy to provoke protest, once begun, public actions take on a life of their own: they are no one's to control and determine, least of all the generals. The defeat of the dictatorial monarchy in Nepal last year after massive street protests occurred with a speed and in a manner that no one had predicted; the expectations of the army there that it too could control the situation proved completely unfounded. Likewise, the recent huge outpouring of support for the chief justice of Pakistan in his battle against yet another Asian military dictatorship took everyone by surprise, not least of all, its president-cum-army commander. So too is Burma now full of both uncertainty and possibility.

The Asian Human Rights Commission today expresses its loud and unequivocal solidarity with the people of Burma. It calls on them to be aware that their suffering and struggle are known to the outside world: unlike twenty years ago, their protests will not be too little heard until it is too late. What happens in Rangoon, Mandalay, Pegu, Taunggyi, Bassein, Moulmein or Myitkyina is now known within minutes throughout the world. The AHRC will for its part do all it can to document, report and advocate on these events as quickly and widely as possible.

The AHRC also especially calls upon the United Nations, in particular its secretary general, world leaders and all concerned persons throughout the world to take this opportunity to speak and act vigorously in support of the people of Burma, who have been forced to put up with too much for far too long. The time for diplomatic niceties and talk about acknowledging pretended steps towards reform is gone. In fact, it was long gone, but the latest extraordinary price increases, threats to the livelihoods of millions throughout the country, ongoing military offensives against entire populations in outlying regions, shutdown of the ICRC operations and arrests and detentions of persons who have done nothing more than walk down a street to say that they can't afford to pay for the junta's incompetence and mismanagement surely demand an unequivocal and lasting international response. The victory of the people of Nepal against their dictatorship was due in large part to the concern and direct interventions of the global community: will it not do as much for the fifty millions in Burma?

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Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)

19th Floor, Go-UP Commercial Building
998 Canton Road
Mongkok, Kowloon
Hong Kong SAR, China
Tel: +852 2698 6339
Fax: +852 2698 6367
Email: ahrchk@ahrchk.org, burma@ahrchk.net
Website: www.ahrchk.net, burma.ahrchk.net

Burma People's Protests 2007: <http://campaigns.ahrchk.net/burmaprotests>

Front cover: A protestor is carried to a waiting van by unidentified men working for government authorities in Hledan Township, Rangoon, on 28 August 2007 (Source: DVB)