

## **Nadine Gordimer pleads for Burma**

Nobel Prize-winning South African author Nadine Gordimer has written to United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to add her voice to unprecedented protests against the ruling military junta in Burma.

Eight truckloads of armed riot police moved into central Yangon on Tuesday after a second day of mass protests against the military junta ended without incident, witnesses said.

The police force, carrying shields, batons and rifles, deployed in the Botataung part of the city, near the end-point of the biggest anti-junta marches in nearly 20 years, Reuters reported.

Another witness said five military trucks packed with soldiers drove into the downtown area, suggesting the junta was filling up the city centre to counter any attempt at a repeat of the earlier mass marches led by Buddhist monks.

Chanting “democracy, democracy”, 10 000 monks had marched through the heart of Yangon earlier in the day in defiance of a threat by the ruling generals to send in troops to end the protests.

During the march there had been no signs of soldiers around the Sule pagoda in central Yangon, the destination of a week of marches by the deeply revered maroon-robed monks. That area was the scene of the worst bloodshed during a crackdown on nationwide pro-democracy protests in 1988 in which up to 3 000 people are thought to have been killed.

In Taunggyok, a coastal city 400km north-west of Yangon, people said up to 40 000 monks and civilians took to the streets on Tuesday as the campaign against 45 years of military rule swelled in size and scope.

As on Monday, when up to 100 000 people came out in support in Yangon, the column of monks stretched several blocks as they marched from the Shwedagon Pagoda, the South-East Asian nation’s holiest shrine and symbolic heart of the campaign.

In a gesture of defiance, some waved the bright red “fighting peacock” flag, emblem of the student unions that spearheaded the 1988 uprising.

In an ominous reminder, vehicles mounted with loudspeakers toured the city in the morning blaring out threats of action under a law allowing the use of military force to break up illegal protests. “People are not to follow, encourage or take part in these marches. Action will be taken against those who violate this order,” the broadcasts said.

### **‘Appalling oppression’**

In a letter to Ban dated September 24, Gordimer expressed her concern over the “appalling, savage oppression of the people of Burma by the military junta”.

"I join my fellow writers who seek freedom of expression there, the Buddhist monks, [and] all the courageous democracy activists who demonstrate for reconciliation and peace, the release from house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, and call upon you at United Nations to take most urgent action before the situation in Burma repeats the tragic massacres of 1988," she said.

She added: "No one anywhere in our world who respects the sanctity of human life, justice and the freedom of a people to demand reconciliation of conflict through peaceful means can turn aside from the spectacle of Burma among us without taking up responsibility to voice protest, in the name of shared humanity."

In 1989, the military junta officially changed the English version of its name from Burma to Myanmar. Burmese opposition groups continue to use the name "Burma" since they do not recognise the legitimacy of the ruling military government nor its authority to rename the country.

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) has also paid tribute to the courage of thousands of Burmese democracy activists—including growing numbers of Buddhist monks—who have embarked on a campaign of peaceful protest in defiance of devastating price increases imposed by the military junta in August.

"The SACC is deeply concerned about the brutal tactics used by the junta to break up these protests. Since August 21, 150 activists have been arrested. Many others have been tear-gassed and beaten. It is reported that one monk died after he and fellow monks were attacked on September 5 by pro-junta paramilitaries," the council said in a statement issued on Friday.

SACC president Tinyiko Maluleke appealed to Ban to take urgent action before the situation in Burma deteriorates further.

"As South Africans," said Maluleke, "it is time to take a stand, and to honour the request from Burmese Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi who once asked us to use our liberty to promote peace in Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi's voice has been silenced since the junta placed her under house arrest, but her words must awaken our conscience today."

The South African government has been castigated for voting against a request earlier this year for the UN Security Council to condemn human rights violations in Burma, including the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Among the reasons given by South Africa at the time were that the detention of an opposition leader was not a threat to world peace and that Professor Ibrahim Gambari, the special UN envoy for Burma, had reported progress in that country.

### **World reaction**

The international community has pleaded with the generals to avoid another bloodbath, but the chilling message behind the legal language of the warnings was lost on nobody in the city of five million

people. "I'm really worried about the possible outbreak of violence," one street vendor said. "We know from experience that these people never hesitate to do what they want."

Far away in their new jungle capital, the generals hunkered down for an emergency "War Office" meeting, a diplomat said, and ethnic Karen rebels on the Thai border said troops of the 22nd Division had been redeployed to Yangon. That division had played a major role in the 1988 carnage.

He was also quoted as telling the State Monks Council the protests were incited by "destructive elements who do not want to see peace, stability and progress in the country"—code for the political opposition.

China, the closest the junta has to a friend, called for "stability", although it is not clear what kind of diplomatic pressure Beijing is exerting on the generals behind the scenes.

United States President George Bush was to announce new sanctions and call for support for political change in a speech at the UN on Tuesday, and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown urged the European Union on Tuesday to take a tougher stance on Burma, saying sanctions against the military-led government should be tightened.

The Burma Campaign United Kingdom said its sources had reported the junta ordering 3 000 maroon monastic robes and telling soldiers to shave their heads, possibly to infiltrate the monks.

In 1988, agents provocateurs were seen stirring up the crowds, giving the military the pretext to restore order. More than 150 people have been arrested since the protests started on August 19 in response to shock increases of fuel prices.

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