



BURMA

Crackdown

Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

Summary



Bystanders clap and cheer while thousands of monks march through Rangoon on September 24, 2007.
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SUMMARY

In August and September 2007, Burmese democracy activists, monks and ordinary people took to the streets of Rangoon and elsewhere to peacefully challenge nearly two decades of dictatorial rule and economic mismanagement by Burma's ruling generals.

In August and September 2007, Burmese democracy activists, monks and ordinary people took to the streets of Rangoon and elsewhere to peacefully challenge nearly two decades of dictatorial rule and economic mismanagement by Burma's ruling generals. While opposition to the military government is widespread in Burma, and small acts of resistance are an everyday occurrence, military repression is so systematic that such sentiment rarely is able to burst into public view; the last comparable public uprising was in August 1988. As in 1988, the generals responded this time with a brutal and bloody crackdown, leaving Burma's population once again struggling for a voice.

The government crackdown included baton-charges and beatings of unarmed demonstrators, mass arbitrary arrests, and repeated instances where weapons were fired shoot-to-kill. To remove the monks and nuns from the protests, the security forces raided dozens of Buddhist monasteries during the night, and sought to enforce the defrocking of thousands of monks. Current protest leaders, opposition party members, and activists from the '88 Generation students were tracked down and arrested – and continue to be arrested and detained.

The Burmese generals have taken draconian measures to ensure that the world does not learn the true story of the horror of their crackdown. They have kept foreign journalists out of Burma and maintained their complete control over domestic news. Many local journalists were arrested after the crackdown, and the internet and mobile phone networks, used extensively to send information, photos, and videos out of Burma, were temporarily shut down, and have remained tightly controlled since.

Of course, those efforts at censorship were only partially successful, as some enterprising and brave individuals found ways to get mobile phone video footage of the demonstrations and crackdown out of the country and onto the world's television screens. This provided a small window into the violence and repression that the Burmese military government continues to use to hold onto power.

This report, based on more than 100 in-depth interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch researchers with eyewitnesses to the events in Rangoon, offers a detailed account of the protests and the brutal crackdown and mass arrest campaign that followed. It is based on interviews with monks and ordinary citizens who participated in the protests, as well as leading monks, protest organizers and international officials. Our report focuses on the events in Rangoon. It leaves out many deadly incidents and abuses that were reported, but for which — because of government restrictions and the risks involved — we were unable to find eyewitnesses. It is thus not the last word—more investigation is needed to uncover the stories, identify all incidents and victims, and trace the broader consequences of the crackdown.

Despite these limitations, this report provides the most detailed account of the crackdown and its aftermath available to date. The first-hand accounts in this report demonstrate that many more people were killed than the Burmese authorities are willing to admit, and sheds new light on the authorities' systematic, often violent pursuit of monks, students, and other peaceful advocates of reform in the weeks and months after the protests.

(previous page top)
Riot police seal off Sule Pagoda
Road in Rangoon on September
26, 2007.
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Reportage by Getty Images

(previous page bottom) Monks,
protected by a "human fence" of
ordinary citizens holding hands,
hold a peaceful march against
military rule on September 25,
2007 in Rangoon.
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Reportage by Getty Images

(right) Monks march down
Pansodan Road towards
Sule Pagoda in Rangoon on
September 26, 2007.
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Reportage by Getty Images





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*(left) Soldiers patrol the streets of Rangoon on September 29, 2007.
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Reportage by Getty Images*

*(above) Protesters flee through the National Library construction site after soldiers opened fire on a demonstration in Rangoon's northern Tamwe district on September 27, 2007, one of the bloodiest incidents of the crackdown.
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The protests began in mid-August 2007, triggered in part by an unexpected decision by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to remove subsidies on fuel and natural gas prices, which increased some commodity prices overnight by 500 percent. On August 19, the '88 Generation student movement (which had played a leading role in the 1988 uprising) organized a peaceful march of some 400 protesters in Rangoon. While the immediate issue was the price hikes, the protest and those that were to follow were also a reflection of people's built up anger and behind-the-scenes mobilization by individuals seeking fundamental political reform and an end to the predatory rule of the military-led SPDC.

The reaction of the SPDC was immediate: on August 21 the authorities began arresting most of the leadership of the '88 Generation students and other activist groups, and had more than 100 activists in detention by August 25. In addition, the SPDC mobilized members of its "mass-based" civilian wing, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), and its abusive militia, Swan Arr Shin, to monitor the streets of Rangoon to beat and arrest any protesters who dared to continue the demonstrations. Despite the immediate crackdown, protesters continued to gather in Rangoon, and the protests soon spread to other cities throughout Burma.

On September 5, the protests reached a turning point when a group of Buddhist monks holding signs denouncing the price hikes marched in Pakokku, a religious center located close to the city of Mandalay. The monks were cheered on by thousands of protesters. The army intervened brutally, firing gunshots over the heads of the monks and beating monks and bystanders. Unconfirmed reports that one monk died from the beatings, and that others had been tied to a lamppost and publicly beaten, caused revulsion and anger in a deeply religious society. The next day, an angry mob surrounded government and religious affairs officials during a visit to a leading monastery, burning the cars of the government delegation and causing a tense six-hour standoff. In response to the violence against monks in Pakokku, the newly formed All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA) demanded an immediate apology from the SPDC, a reduction in prices, the release of all political prisoners including opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and a dialogue between the

SPDC and the political opposition. The ABMA threatened to excommunicate the SPDC leadership from the Buddhist community if it did not meet these demands by September 17. When the SPDC ignored the demands of the ABMA, the ABMA excommunicated the SPDC leaders on September 17 and called for a resumption of the protests. ABMA members began refusing to accept alms from SPDC officials and their families, a symbolically potent act known as "overturning the bowls" (Patta Nikkujjana Kamma).

Monks throughout Burma responded to the ABMA's call and on September 17 began daily marches. Remarkably, the security forces did not directly interfere in the protests for some days, although intelligence officials did photograph and videotape the marchers. It is unclear why the protests were allowed to proceed. The participants grew from the hundreds into the thousands, as an increasing number of monks participated and civilians began to join them.

On September 22, another decisive moment occurred: amidst torrential rain, a group of some 500 monks was allowed to pass through the barricades surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi's home, where she has been held under house arrest for 12 of the past 17 years, and briefly pray with her. This unexpected and unprecedented meeting invigorated the protests.

The next day, an estimated 20,000 protesters, including some 3,000 monks, marched in Rangoon, shouting slogans for the release of political prisoners and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and for the SPDC to relinquish its hold on power. A day later, September 24, the Rangoon protests exploded in size, to an estimated 150,000 people, including 30,000 to 50,000 monks. Many political groups, including elected parliamentarians of the opposition National League for Democracy who were never allowed to take up their seats after the 1990 elections, as well as the banned All Burma Buddhist Monks Union, joined the marches. Well-known public figures such as the comedian Zargana and the movie star Kyaw Thu publicly offered alms to the marching monks to demonstrate support for their cause. Similar marches took place in 25 cities across Burma.





(previous page top)
Soldiers and riot police
command people to leave the
area around Sule Pagoda, in
front of City Hall in Rangoon,
on September 26, 2007.
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Reportage by Getty Images

(previous page bottom)
A monk weeps as marchers
are blocked at an army
roadblock in Rangoon on
September 26, 2007.
© 2007 Alayung Thaksin/Panos

(right) A group of monks pray
in front of riot policemen and
soldiers as they attempted to
proceed to the Shwedagon
Pagoda in Rangoon on
September 26, 2007.
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On the evening of September 24, the SPDC signaled it was about to crack down on the protests. The minister of religious affairs appeared on state television to denounce the protests as the work of “internal and external destructionists.”

The state-controlled Sangha Maha Nayaka committee (a state-controlled committee of senior monks that deals with religious issues) prohibited monks from participating in “secular affairs” or joining “illegal” organizations such as the ABMA. USDA and ward Peace and Development Council (PDC) trucks began circulating the next morning, warning people over loudspeakers not to participate in the protests. Despite the warnings, a similarly large crowd of protesters again appeared on the streets of Rangoon on September 25, the last day of protests before the crackdown.

On the night of September 25, the SPDC announced a nighttime curfew and began arresting some prominent figures who had supported the protesters, like the comedian Zargana. A large number of army troops were moved into Rangoon.

The next morning, September 26, the first serious attacks against the protesters took place when riot police and army troops surrounded and attacked monks at the main Shwedagon Pagoda, severely beating many monks. According to several eyewitnesses, the riot police beat one monk to death. When the protesters moved to the Sule Pagoda, three kilometers away, they were again beaten and dispersed by the riot police and Swan Arr Shin militia, who beat and detained many of the protesters. A separate group of protesters marching downtown were stopped by army troops and Swan Arr Shin militia near the Thakin Mya Park in the western downtown area. Soldiers opened fire directly into the crowd, hitting at least four protesters. As the crowd fled, they were blocked by army troops on Strand Road, where another protester was shot. Other marches continued in downtown Rangoon, creating a chaotic scene. At the end of the day, a one-kilometer-long procession of monks and protesters left the downtown area, showing the public’s determination to continue their protests.

During the night of September 26-27, the security forces raided monasteries throughout Rangoon. The most violent raid took place at the Ngwe Kyar Yan Monastery, where

the security forces clashed violently with the monks, and detained some 100 monks. Unconfirmed reports claim one monk was killed during the raid.

On the morning of September 27, army troops returned to the Ngwe Kyar Yan Monastery to arrest the remaining monks. They were surrounded by an angry crowd of residents. In the ensuing clashes, at least seven people were killed by the security forces, including a local high school student. Around mid-day, a second clash took place around the Sule Pagoda, as soldiers, riot police, and the Swan Arr Shin dispersed a large crowd of protesters, with the troops shooting first in the air and then directly into the protesters. In scenes beamed around the world, Kenji Nagai, a Japanese video-journalist, was deliberately shot and killed, and eyewitnesses saw another man and a woman also shot and likely killed. The riot police and Swan Arr Shin proceeded to beat and detain large numbers of protesters. At around 2 p.m., another deadly shooting took place, when soldiers shot dead a student holding the “Fighting Peacock” flag of the ‘88 Generation student movement at the Pansodan overpass.

On September 27, a separate deadly incident took place when army soldiers surrounded marchers in front of Tamwe High School 3, and then drove a military vehicle directly into the crowd, knocking down and killing three protesters. When the soldiers got out of the truck, they opened fire on the fleeing crowd. Several others were killed in the ensuing shooting: soldiers shot in the back and killed a student climbing over the wall of his school and shot down three young men who fled into a neighboring construction site by the National Library. As they tracked down protesters, they fired into a ditch filled with fleeing people, and deliberately shot dead a protester hiding inside an empty water barrel. The security forces then detained hundreds of protesters, beating them before taking them to nearby detention facilities. Human Rights Watch confirmed at least eight civilian deaths at this clash.

Although thousands of people continued to try and organize protests on September 28 and 29, the SPDC managed to retake control of the streets by flooding Rangoon with thousands of troops, riot police, and militia members. The role of the Swan Arr Shin and USDA militias was particularly



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*Police patrolling downtown Rangoon aim their weapons at apartments where they suspect protesters are hiding on September 29, 2007.
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*Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai
fatally shot at point-blank range
by Burmese security forces as
they dispersed protesters on
September 27, 2007.
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important, as they allowed the SPDC to patrol every street with abusive militia personnel willing to beat up and detain anyone even attempting to assemble. Security forces continued to fire live ammunition and rubber bullets at protesters who attempted to gather.

As the crackdown on the streets proceeded, the security forces also began raiding monasteries in Rangoon and other cities involved in the protests, detaining thousands of monks and frequently physically occupying the monasteries. Detained monks were taken to detention centers, de-robed, and ordered to leave their monasteries for their native villages—monks who escaped detention also were often forced to flee back to their native villages, as their monasteries were occupied. Because the massive arrests of monks, their de-robing, and the occupation of their monasteries, monks virtually vanished from the streets of Rangoon. The raiding and occupation of monasteries continues at the time this report was issued in early December: on November 27, the authorities ordered the closure of the well-known Maggin Monastery, which cared for HIV/AIDS patients. Many monks continue to be held in detention.

Monks were not the only target of the arrest raids. The security forces, relying on the photos and videotapes collected by intelligence agents during the protests immediately began arresting anyone suspected of being involved in the protests. The arrest campaign highlights the SPDCs fear-inducing, totalitarian ability to penetrate the lives of its citizens: using multiple, overlapping networks such as the ward PDC, the USDA, Swan Arr Shin, and the security forces, the SPDC has the capacity to closely monitor and intimidate its citizens, arresting anyone it deems suspect. It has done so systematically since the September protest.

The state-controlled press claims that only 2,836 persons were detained, and only 91 remain in detention, but the actual number of detained persons was much greater, as is the number of those who remain in detention. Most worryingly, the SPDC has failed to account for hundreds of persons who have “disappeared” without trace since the protests, with families unable to confirm if their missing relatives are being detained or have been killed.

The detainees were kept at a variety of ad-hoc detention centers, including the City Hall, Kyaik Ka San Race Course, and the Government Technical Institute, where they faced life-threatening and unsanitary detention conditions. Human Rights Watch documented at least seven deaths in these detention facilities, although the total number is likely to be significantly higher. Detainees underwent basic interrogation, and anyone suspected of being an opposition activist or having been involved in the protests was sent for further interrogation at Insein prison and other facilities. Human Rights Watch documented significant abuse and torture at both the ad-hoc detention facilities and Insein prison: one detainee was hung upside down for long periods of time while being punched; several others were beaten unconscious during interrogations, and were forced to endure “stress positions” and sleep deprivation.

Like the raids on the monasteries, the arrest campaign continues at the time this report was issued in early December, with Human Rights Watch receiving almost daily reports of new arrests. In early November, the authorities arrested U Gambira, the head of the All-Burma Monks Alliance, and charged him with treason. On November 13, the labor rights activist Su Su Nway and her colleague Bo Bo Win Hlaing were arrested in Rangoon, during the visit of UN Human Rights Envoy Paulo Pinheiro. On November 20, a number of ethnic leaders and NLD officials were detained in Rangoon.

In the hundreds of thousands, the people of Burma once again showed tremendous courage in standing up to the generals. Their demands have been simple, amounting to basic rights that much of the rest of the world takes for granted: an end to military rule, democratic reform, and the release of political prisoners including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Perhaps most important, they want to live free from the pervasive fear and violence engendered by the repression in Burma. They wish to freely express themselves, assemble and protest without fear of arrest, detention and torture. The generals, clearly shaken by the open defiance of their rule, responded with bloodshed and repression, desperate to return to “business as usual”—which in Burma means dictatorial rule, widespread human rights abuses, and the silencing of any critical voices.

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*(top) Crowds carry a student demonstrator who was shot dead in Rangoon on September 27, 2007.
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*Blood soaked sandals are left on a street following a shooting by soldiers during a protest in downtown Rangoon, September 27, 2007.
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*(bottom) Crowds carry a student demonstrator who was shot dead in Rangoon on September 27, 2007.
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The Burmese government has taken no steps to address the human rights crisis caused by its brutal crackdown on peaceful protest. Unfortunately, this is nothing new. The government has ignored recommendations for reform from friends and critics alike since it annulled elections in 1990.

The international community has responded unevenly. Immediately after the crackdown, the United Nations Security Council dispatched Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari, held a public hearing, and issued a presidential statement expressing its concern. It could have done more by adopting a resolution with an arms embargo, financial and other sanctions, and demanding specific, concrete steps towards the restoration of civilian rule and the holding of free and fair elections. The United States responded strongly, announcing new sanctions and pressing China, India, Japan, and the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) to also adopt sanctions and put pressure on the SPDC. The European Union also responded with sanctions and strong statements of condemnation, though it is not clear that it will be willing to adopt the kind of financial sanctions that would really matter to Burma's leaders.

While China reportedly pressured Burma to allow Special Envoy Gambari and Special Rapporteur Paulo Pinheiro to visit Burma and for the SPDC to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, Beijing has recently said that it was opposed to further Security Council activity on Burma. China is widely seen as the protector of the SPDC and therefore part of the problem. ASEAN surprised many with its strong statement of "revulsion" at the time of the crackdown, but it has since closed ranks at its summit in Singapore, even un-inviting Gambari to brief the assembled leaders. India has hardly responded to the crackdown, instead putting its financial interests and its desire to compete with China for influence with the SPDC over its past support peaceful and democratic reform. Another key country, Japan, responded in its traditionally tepid mode. It announced a modest cut in aid, and only then because of public outrage following the killing of a Japanese journalist.

It is almost a truism that "change must come from within." Change is what the protesters peacefully sought. Violence and repression is what they received in return. Now is the

time for the international community to do its part. In a country increasingly reliant on the outside world for arms, trade, investment, and foreign currency, the international community can play a decisive role in pushing for reform in Burma.

Concerned states and international institutions must stand united in condemning the crackdown, imposing financial sanctions on the government and its leaders, adopting and implementing an arms embargo, demanding an international commission of inquiry to establish exactly what happened during the crackdown, and supporting the call for ending repression and promoting respect for basic rights in Burma. Fundamental change is needed in Burma, and international unity is required to bring about such change, particularly the support of China, India, Thailand, Japan, Singapore, and other regional actors. Thus far, the signs are not encouraging.

As the most powerful supporter of the regime, China is the key. In January 2007 it protected the generals by vetoing a United Nations Security Council resolution on Burma. It has made it clear that it will block any future resolutions. China should understand the risks associated with such close support for a ruthless dictatorship, particularly in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

This is a defining moment for the future of Burma, caught in the midst of a wave of repression and arrests, but with the outcome of the struggle for its future still undecided. History will be a harsh judge of countries such as China, India, and Thailand – powerful neighbors of Burma – who have thus far done little or nothing to stand up for Burma's long-suffering people. So long as China, India, Thailand and others protect the generals, they are likely to be able to ride out the storm – at least until the Burmese people rise up again, as they almost certainly will.

(A set of detailed recommendations is set forth at the end of this report.)



During monsoon rains, monks take part in a daily protest march against the government in Rangoon on September 22, 2007.
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Crackdown

Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma

In August and September 2007, Burmese democracy activists, monks, and ordinary people took to the streets of Rangoon and elsewhere to peacefully challenge nearly two decades of dictatorial rule and economic mismanagement by Burma's ruling generals.

The government's response included baton-charges and beatings of unarmed demonstrators, mass arbitrary arrests, and use of lethal force. To remove the monks and nuns from the protests, the security forces raided dozens of Buddhist monasteries during the night and defrocked large numbers of monks. Current protest leaders, opposition party members, activists from the '88 Generation students, and members of the public who participated in demonstrations were tracked down and arrested—and continue to be arrested and detained. As this report goes to press, arrests and monastery raids are continuing in Burma.

This report provides the most detailed account of the crackdown and its aftermath available to date. Based on more than 100 in-depth interviews with eyewitnesses to the events in Rangoon, the report offers a detailed account of the protests and the brutal crackdown and mass arrest campaign that followed. Human Rights Watch spoke with many who participated in the protests, as well as leading monks, protest organizers, and international officials.

The first-hand accounts in this report demonstrate that many more people were killed than the Burmese authorities are willing to admit, and sheds new light on the authorities' systematic, often violent pursuit of monks, students, and other peaceful advocates of reform in the weeks and months after the protests.



*Monks march down Pansodan Road
towards Sule Pagoda in Rangoon
on September 26, 2007.
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