

NEWS WRAP

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Since September 2007, the people of Myanmar defied the corrupt, inept and ruthless military generals. Hundreds of thousands participated in street demonstrations, demanding democracy. The brutal rulers had suppressed a popular revolt in 1988, killing 3000 people. The protests began in August '07, when the Myanmar government had drastically raised fuel-prices. Buddhist Monks in Myanmar are integrated in the wider society and are influential, as they have a large number of young men among their ranks. While the military regime arrested many leaders and mobilized plain-clothed thugs to assault demonstrators the soldiers fired over the heads of Buddhist monks, who were demonstrating in the central town of Pakkoku. Demanding an apology, the clergy had set 17 September '07 as deadline. Their demands not being accepted, the Buddhist monks took to the streets. The monks excommunicated the military and their families, and also announced that they would not accept alms from them.

Prayers and processions emerged from Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon. The All Burma Monks' Altrance exhorted the people to "struggle peacefully against the evil military dictatorship." There were cries of "democracy, democracy" in the political chants of the monks. Huge numbers of ordinary Myanmar citizens joined in the protests. Teargas shells and automatic weapons were fired by the security forces in the western town of Sittwe and Yangon. Images of the protests in Yangon were spread across Myanmar, by the internet and digital cameras. Monks and laymen prayed outside the heavily guarded residence of Aung Su Kyi, the leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), on 22 September '07. The protesters in Yangon numbered 100,000 on 24 September '07. The monks kept waving the emblem of the 1988 students protests, a red "fighting peacock" flag. Troops and riot police have moved into positions in Yangon. With night time curfew, troops have surrounded monasteries in Yangon. The monks had taken an active part in the protests of 1988 and 1990. Swarms of protesters have defied arrests, tear gas, baton charges and bullets.

Under pressure for co-ordinated sanctions on Myanmar, the UN Security Council met on 27 September '07. Russia and China argued that the unrest was an internal matter. In keeping with the policies of western countries for the last twenty years, USA declared new sanctions against the Myanmar regime. But western sanctions have been tried earlier, and they have failed. Members of the Association of South-Asian Nations have been pursuing "constructive engagement" and also deriving economic gains, by securing access to Myanmar's rich resources of timber, oil, gas and minerals. Myanmar was admitted to ASEAN in 1997. China has been supplying Myanmar with weapons, which include multiple-rocket launchers, fighter aircraft and guided missile launcher craft. Chinese firms are installing about 40 hydropower projects, and around 17 onshore and offshore oil-and-gas projects in Myanmar. There are plans to build 2400 kms of oil-and-gas pipelines, from Arakan in western Myanmar to Yunnan province in China. Trade in manufactured goods, opium and heroin has boomed in the sleazy border town, Ruili. Shared needles have led to China's first HIV epidemic, India has maintained cordial relations with Myanmar's generals, for oil and gas.

UN's special envoy to Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari toured Asia in October '07, to convince Myanmar's neighbours to bring pressure on the military regime. The European Union has tightened economic sanctions, presumably under American pressure by banning imports of Burmese timber, gem stones and precious metals. In protest at the

shooting of a Japanese journalist during the violence, Japan has reduced its aid to Myanmar.

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From a high pace of 41.14% a year earlier, India's export growth fell to 18.91%, to \$12.69 billion, in August '07, caused by a sharp appreciation of the rupee. There are fears that eight million people engaged in export activities, may lose their jobs, if the rupee rise is not curbed. During August '07, imports grew at 32.64% (almost at 2006 levels), amounting to \$19.57 billion. The export-import gap being widened, India's trade deficit increased by 68.51%, to hit \$6.88 billion, for August '07. During April-August '07, oil imports valued at \$25.9 billion, compared to \$23.9 billion, for the corresponding 2006, registering a growth of 8.32%. The non-oil imports registered a growth of 42.85%, to \$66 billion, during April-August '07, compared to \$46.26 billion, a year earlier.

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