

What's going on in Burma?

History

In 1987 the Burmese government devalued the currency making savings virtually worthless. Students began to demonstrate and slowly monks and the general public became involved. The situation came to a head when thousands of protestors took part in peaceful demonstrations around the country calling for democracy and the end of the period of dictatorship by General Ne Win. On 18 September 1988, the Burmese military seized power in a coup and brutally suppressed the demonstrations. They called a national election in 1989, which was easily won by Aung San Suu Kyi, a pro-democracy campaigner and leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD). However, Aung San Suu Kyi was never allowed to rule as the junta refused to hand over power. Instead, Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest, and apart from brief stints of freedom, albeit with travel restrictions, has remained in detention ever since.

What caused the recent demonstrations?

On 15 August this year, the government increased the price of fuel – petrol and diesel doubled in price while compressed gas, which is used to run buses, was made 5 times as expensive. Burma is a desperately poor country with an estimated 32% of the population living under the poverty line, whilst most of the rest of the country is barely above it. These fuel increases left many unable to travel to work, and also lead to an increase in food prices.

Pro-democracy activists began demonstrating in Rangoon and the government quickly moved in to arrest the protestors, but around the country protests continued. On 5 September in Pakokku a large number of troops broke up a peaceful rally using force, and at least 3 monks were injured. Demanding an apology, monks in Pakokku briefly took hostage some government officials. They set a deadline of 17 September, but by that date had received no apology. Following this, many more monks joined the demonstrations which grew daily until tens of thousands of monks were involved. As the numbers grew, the public overcame their fear of retaliation and joined the movement, as did key members of the NLD. One rally marched past the house of Aung San Suu Kyi, clearly linking the monks' movement with a desire for a change of government.

At first the army took no action, but after a week of growing demonstrations, they warned that they would act against further protests. Curfews were put in place and hundreds of troops and riot police were brought in to try to stop the uprising. They also cracked down on internet and media to prevent the flow of information to the outside world, but television footage shows them taking violent action against the monks and other protestors. The worst day of violence was seen on 27 September when the junta claims that 9 people were killed, although other reports are claiming the true figure is far higher and includes children.

According to a statement in an official newspaper, almost 3,000 people have been detained since the government began its crackdown on the protests. The statement added that only 500 were still in custody, but diplomats believe the numbers detained are far higher. The government has declared that they will continue to hunt for those involved in the anti-government protests, and they will then interrogate them and release 'those who should be released'. Monks are believed to have been rounded up for transport to prison camps in the north of the country.

Child soldiers

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that children as young as 10 are being beaten or threatened with arrest to make them enlist in the army. Burma has previously declared that they are working towards preventing the recruitment of children by the military, although the HRW report claims that documents are routinely falsifying enlistment documents to register children as being 18, and that the government fails to punish the perpetrators.

International Response

There has been worldwide concern over human rights abuses in Burma following these crackdowns, and international pressure has been mounting on the military rulers. The US has responded by tightening sanctions on the military leadership and has called for action to be taken over the protests. The EU have supported these calls, however, neither the US nor the EU have much influence over the ruling Junta. China, Russia and India are seen as having the most influence and have called on leaders to stop using violence against the protestors, but are reluctant to interfere in Burma's domestic affairs. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) – of which Burma is a member – has called on the authorities to stop violence in one of their strongest ever statements against a member country, and the UN Security Council will discuss the use of child soldiers in Burma when they meet soon.

But Burma's leaders appear unmoved by the calls and have ruled out a change of political course. They claim that events in Burma do not threaten the region and argue that UN intervention is unnecessary.

Why not call the country Myanmar?

The country officially changed its name to Myanmar in 1989 when the military junta took control of the country. The name Burma is favoured by the democracy movement, as they do not accept that the unelected military regime has the authority to change the official name of the country.

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