

## **Burma protest movement 'remains strong'**

*Bangkok Post*

Last week's brutal crackdown on protests in Burma will not stop the growing movement for reform in the pariah state, pro-democracy leaders in exile said Friday in Bangkok.

The unprecedented Buddhist monk-led protests ignited a fire among long-suffering Burmese that will not be easily extinguished, but the international community must pressure the military regime to avoid further bloodshed, the activists told a Bangkok press conference.

"Many people are saying the Burmese revolt is over, but that is not true," said Naing Aung of the Forum for Democracy in Burma. "A movement that brought out 1 million people willing to defy bullets cannot easily disappear."

Leaders of several groups said the images thousands of monks marching peacefully, and finally being beaten, had brought together both Burmese citizens and people around the world to stand up to the regime.

"Those two contradictory images of peace and brutality were powerful for the world to see, but this has been going on in Burma for the last 50 years, especially in the ethnic areas," said Salai Lian Sakhong of the Ethnic Nationalities Council.

"We have been suffering and dying and crying without the world knowing about it, but now the people of Burma are uniting, and we're saying: 'no more killing, no more beating.'"

The exiled pro-democracy leaders agreed that the moral authority of the country's monks has lent powerful impetus to the movement, and said the military regime is fearful because it has not been able to control the monkhood.

"People in the communities always give food to the monks, but now the people have started to go to the monks to ask them for food," said Naing Aung of the Forum for Democracy in Burma. "The monks see how the people are suffering, and as the moral authority of the communities, they are now demanding to change the system."

Khin Ohmas, an advocate for political prisoners and veteran of the mass 1988 democracy uprising that ended with a bloody crackdown, said the resurgent movement is stronger for past experiences and for the new leadership of the monks.

"When we were out in the streets, many people might've just seen us as rebellious kids - and, in a way, we were," she said. "But now people see that the monks are leading the way, and they represent the highest level of respect in our society."

Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai author, teacher and devout Buddhist, said monks have a duty to be involved in politics when injustice is being committed.

"Buddhist monks must strive for peace on the inside, and peace on the outside - it is about looking for balance all through life - and politics is part of that whole," he said. "It is only in the West that Buddhism has become some kind of escape."

U Maung Maung, of the National Council of the Union of Burma, rejected the commonly held idea that the military junta is deaf to international criticism.

"If you don't read Burmese, you may think that," he said. "But the Burmese media, which are run by the regime, they are reacting all the time to what the US says, the EU, the UN. They do care about international opinion, and it is important to pressure them." (dpa)

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