

EXCLUSIVE-Myanmar protests "just the start" - top dissident

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BANGKOK, Sept 13 (Reuters) - Nearly four weeks of protests in Myanmar are "just the start" of a mass movement against the ruling junta and the grinding poverty endured by the former Burma's 53 million people, a top activist said from hiding. "There is no way this will stop," Htay Kywe told Reuters from a secret location inside Myanmar, where he has been in hiding since evading an Aug. 21 crackdown on dissidents who launched a rare string of protests against shock increases of fuel prices.

"Arresting and killing people will not free us from economic hardship," the 39-year-old said in digitally recorded answers to questions e-mailed by Reuters and authenticated by a person known to be a very close friend.

Thirteen of Htay Kywe's colleagues in the "88 Generation Students Group" that spearheaded a nationwide uprising against military rule in 1988 have been arrested and accused of terrorism, charges that could see them jailed for decades.

But Htay Kywe, who managed to elude midnight raids on homes across Yangon, said the generals who have run the Southeast Asian nation for the last 45 years would never be able to cover up the reality of deepening poverty.

"As long as the public are experiencing a lack of development, economic hardship, authoritarian rule and injustice, there will be, and will always be, a situation where the public will not accept it and will fight back," he said.

More than 150 people have been detained in the current crackdown, one of the harshest since troops were sent in to crush the 1988 uprising with the loss of an estimated 3,000 lives.

Although memories of the bloodshed are still fresh in people's minds, Htay Kywe said increasing economic hardship would fuel the underground social movement.

"As long as they are unable to solve the troubles the country is in today, movements like this will never end," he said. "Like the rising tide and waves, the military government will be hearing these voices loud and clear."

Even as the protests have spread, they have remained focused firmly on deteriorating living conditions in a country seen as one of Asia's brightest prospects when it won independence from Britain in 1948 and now one of the region's poorest.

"AMONG THE PUBLIC"

Countering junta charges he was being "sheltered" by a Western embassy, Htay Kywe said he was hiding "among the public".

"We are hiding because we want to continue working hand-in-hand with the public to show evidence of this military government's untruthful political solutions," he said.

Analysts said the fact he and other activists such as Ma Nilar and Suu Suu Nway had remained undetected for so long suggested the junta's internal spy networks may not be as powerful or sophisticated as they used to be.

In particular, they pointed to the 2004 purge of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and the dismantling of his Military Intelligence-run network of informants and secret police.

Despite the latest crackdown, the fuel price protests have spread to the centre and northwest and have started to involve Buddhist monks, key players in the 1988 uprising.

The army's firing of warning shots to disperse a crowd of protesting monks in Pakokku last week triggered an angry response the next day from monks, who seized 13 government officials and torched four of their vehicles.

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