

Action, Words, and Prayers: Chin Solidarity for the Protests in Burma

*A report by Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO)

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Like all the peoples of Burma, the Chin people have been greatly affected by the protests against the military regime and the retaliatory crackdowns in Burma. Both inside Burma and in exile, the Chin people have been and continue to be active participants in the resistance movement against Burma's military regime and strong proponents of democratic transition. Since the protests began in August, the Chins have engaged in demonstrations of solidarity, issued statements of support, and prayed for change. Hope for a new Burma survives in these actions, words, and prayers.

THE PROTESTS

On 15 August 2007, the military unexpectedly and arbitrarily raised the price of fuel, making transportation and basic commodities prohibitively expensive. Four days later, on 19 August, hundreds of student leaders marched through the streets of Rangoon in peaceful protest against the fuel hike. Small demonstrations spread throughout the country. Burma's revered Buddhist monks joined the calls for action and by 18 September thousands of monks were leading daily marches. In the next

several days, tens of thousands of civilians joined the monks, calling for peaceful change in Burma.



September Protests in Rangoon

Unfortunately, the demands of the student leaders, monks, and people of Burma were met with unrestrained violence by the military regime. Starting on 26 September, the regime began raiding monasteries, arresting and beating monks, shooting unarmed protesters, and committing other atrocities against the people of Burma. As a result of the regime's retaliation, many are believed to be dead and many more injured or imprisoned, including hundreds of the revered monks who fomented the protests.



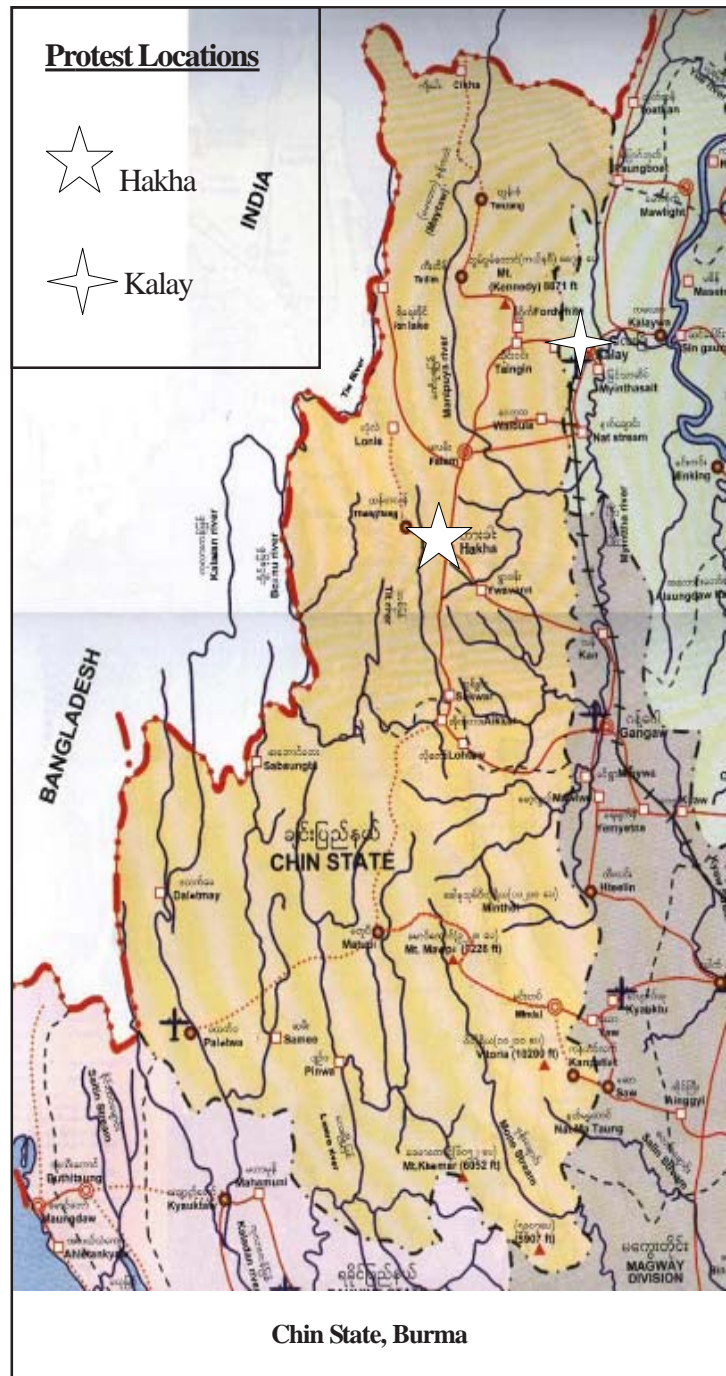
■ Inside Chin State

In Chin State and in other parts of Burma, the Chin people were quick to join in the call for peaceful change in Burma. As in other parts of the country, Chin State was hard hit by the increase in fuel prices. Soon after the regime increased the cost of diesel and petrol, Chin State saw a significant rise in the cost of fuel, with petrol prices doubling in price in some areas. As a result, transportation costs rose to dramatic new heights, paralyzing parts of the State and increasing the price of other essential commodities.

Protests inside Chin State began in early September when 25 National League for Democracy (NLD) members led a peaceful march in Hakha Town, the capital of Chin State. The protesters marched to the Town Peace and Development Council's office in Hakha on 4 September and issued demands to reduce the prices of fuel and commodities and cease abusive taxation practices. The next day, five leaders of the demonstration were called for questioning by the authorities and prohibited from gathering in meetings of five or more persons.

Beginning on 18 September, as protests heated up in other areas of the country, the SPDC tightened security in Hakha and other Chin towns, stationing security forces around monasteries and other prominent public areas. In Hakha, households were forced to perform sentry duty. The authorities also heightened the monitoring of NLD members throughout Chin State.

Despite the heightened security, 200 monks filled the streets on 19 September in the Chin-dominated town of Kalaymyo in Sagaing Division. Tens of thousands of students and civilians joined the monks during the next several days. Kalay University, where more than 80% of the students are Chin, was one of the most active campuses engaged in protests against the SPDC during the demonstration. By the fourth consecutive day of demonstrations in Kalaymyo, there were an estimated 20,000 participants. The SPDC responded to the protests by sending reinforcements on 25 September to disperse the crowds. On 26 September, warnings were issued over loudspeakers throughout the night that those involved in the demonstrations would be arrested and dealt with severely.





■ Chin involvement in Rangoon Protests

Most of the initial large-scale protests of September were concentrated outside Chin State in urban areas such as Rangoon. As there are no Universities in Chin State, many Chin students attend Universities in and around Rangoon. When the regime first announced the fuel hike, many Chin students as well as two elected Chin MPs, Pu Cin Sian Thang of the Zomi National Congress and Pu Thawng Kho Thang of the United Nationalities League for Democracy, joined in the early demonstrations led by the 88 Generation student leaders.

As the situation in Rangoon intensified, the authorities ordered the students to return to their homes in Chin State. Hundreds of Chin students, however, refused to leave and instead joined the daily marches with the monks. Chin students encouraged Chin families in Rangoon and elsewhere to support the monks by offering water, food, and moral support. Below are the summarized accounts of several Chin students involved in the Rangoon protests:¹

J. C.

I got involved because I believe in democracy and I want to live in freedom.

News of the impending protests spread by word of mouth- from teashop to teashop, classroom to classroom.

The monks began to march through the streets of Rangoon on 18 September. They were our heroes and we wanted to give them courage to face the soldiers. We joined hands and walked beside them as they marched. Day by day, the protests gained momentum as more and more people began to participate. I saw several Chin friends and students in the streets.

The military started to crackdown on the protesters on 26 September. On the 27th, my friends and I went to Sule Pagoda but the security was very tight- soldiers were all around. There were only two monks to lead us in prayer. Even as we prayed, the soldiers pointed their guns at us.

At around noon, tens of thousands of people started to fill the streets and some monks came to lead us in the march. It was not long before the military arrived. Well-equipped soldiers piled out of several large trucks to face the demonstrators. They opened fire on the crowd. I was standing just five feet from the Japanese journalist. I saw him shot point-blank. Then they started shooting at us and we ran.

Many people were arrested and beaten too. I saw them grab a woman by the hair and throw her into a waiting car. The monks surrendered peacefully to the soldiers. They did not put up a struggle or try to flee. In the chaos, I was knocked down by two soldiers. I fell to the ground. One of the soldiers held me down by my neck and the other soldier started hitting me in the face and head. Some of the other protesters saw what was happening and threw rocks at the soldiers. As soon as the soldier holding me down released his grasp, I ran away. By God's grace, I survived.

“No one is secure in Burma. There is no rule of law there. We live in constant fear in Burma.”

that they were searching for me. Fearing arrest, I fled Burma in October.

My hope now is that the international community will see how ruthless this government is and they will take action. No one is secure in Burma. There is no rule of law there. We live in constant fear in Burma. We all wish for democratic change but we have no way to stand up against their guns.



¹ For security purposes, the names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.



T. L.

I was studying law at Dagon University in Rangoon when the protests broke out. I joined the protests because I want there to be change in Burma. We want a government that respects human rights. We want a government that is not violent against its people. When the monks called people to join them, many of us decided to follow the monks. I joined in the protests on 24 September. Many of my Chin friends also joined.

For several consecutive days, we marched in the streets without any problems. Then on the 27th, the soldiers began to shoot at us. One of my friends was caught and beaten very badly by the soldiers. However, I was able to run to safety. That evening, I sent an e-mail to my friends, encouraging them to be brave and continue to protest. I told them that this was the time to take action.

My friends and I arranged to meet at a teashop the next day near Sule Pagoda. We waited for the monks but they never arrived. Without the monks, we continued to protest in the streets. That day, the military shot at us again. I saw many people beaten and arrested. Soldiers were everywhere.

“We want a government that respects human rights. We want a government that is not violent against its people.”

By the end of the day, I felt physically and mentally exhausted. That evening, when I returned to the student hostel where I was staying, the management warned me that soldiers had come looking for me. They said they had a photograph of me participating in the protests. Because the military already knew of me from my activities as a student leader, I knew I was in serious trouble.

Fearing arrest, I fled Burma. I recently spoke to my parents who told me that the military continues to search for me and has come looking for me at my house in Falam Town. I know I cannot return to Burma.

N. C.

Before the protests, I had been living in Rangoon and working as an engineer with a company located in downtown Rangoon. On the 25th, many of the shops and companies downtown were closed because of the protests, including my workplace.



On the 25th, I saw all the monks marching in the street. I wanted to encourage them so I donated water to those marching. The next day, I joined the protesters. I walked beside the monks, following them to Sule Pagoda. The soldiers blocked some roads along our route so we were forced to change paths many times. When we got to the pagoda, soldiers would not allow us to pass. Although there was a heavy military presence, I did not see any violence.

It was not until the 28th that I saw the military crackdown against the protesters. On that day, I was engaged in the marches. When we arrived at Mingala Plaza, our path was blocked by soldiers. They were lined up and began shooting in the air. As they started to approach the protesters, we all went running. They sprayed tear gas into the crowd. I escaped, but I know many people were arrested and beaten.

That evening I was afraid to return to my apartment because it is located downtown, near where the protests had taken place. That night, I stayed with a friend. The next morning, I called a work colleague who informed me that the military had been searching for me. He told me that they had raided my apartment during the night and had come to my workplace looking for me. Afraid of being arrested, I went into hiding.

On 16 October, I called my family in Thantlang Town. My wife told me that the military had come looking for me on 12 October. When they did not find me, they told my wife to report to their office on 15 October. They forced her to sign an agreement stating that she would report any information she discovered. She told me that I should flee Burma. After speaking to my wife, I fled Burma. I have not heard from her since and I am very afraid for her safety.



L. H.

I got involved in the September protests because the people of Burma have been suffering for so long.

On the 25th, my friends and I met and joined the monks, flanking them at their sides. We marched from Shwedagon to Sule Pagoda then onto Mingala Market. We saw soldiers along the way but we did not have any problems.

The next day we marched again. This day, outside the Traders Hotel, soldiers began to beat and shoot at the protesters. When the soldiers started to shoot, we all ran. After the 27th, the military cracked down hard on the protesters. They continue to search for anyone involved in the protests. Many of my friends who were involved in the protests have since been arrested.

“Many of my friends who were involved in the protests have since been arrested.”

On 8 October, the army came to my house around 7 pm searching for me but I was not home. When I heard the military was looking for me, I went into hiding. After several days, I contacted a friend in Rangoon but he informed me that the military was still searching for me. I had no choice but to flee Burma.

I believe there will be change in Burma but it will only come if we use peaceful means.



■ The Aftermath

The peaceful demands of the monks and people were met with unrestrained violence and aggression by the military regime. Starting on 26 September, monasteries were raided; curfews were imposed; communications were shut-down; monks, student leaders, members of political opposition parties, and others were rounded up by the military regime.

Arrest of Chin MPs

Among those caught up in the arrests were two prominent and well-respected Chin leaders and elected members of parliament, Pu Cin Sian Thang of the Zomi National Congress and Pu Thawng Kho Thang of the United Nationalities League for Democracy. Both were taken from their homes in Rangoon during the early morning hours of 27 September, put onto a truck, and brought to Aungtarpay Interrogation Center in Kyaikkasan, Rangoon.

After being detained for over one month, both political leaders were finally released on 31 October. For Pu Cin Sian Thang, freedom was fleeting. At 8:00 am on 21 November, Pu Cin Sian Thang was re-arrested by two officers. The authorities also raided Pu Thawng Kho Thang's house that same morning. However, he was not home at the time and thereby avoided certain arrest. Meanwhile, the whereabouts of Pu Cin Sian Thang remains unknown. With this most recent arrest marking his eighth period of detention in Burma, the Chin people remain particularly concerned about the well-being of 69-year old Pu Cin Sian Thang.



Pu Cin Sian Thang



From Protest to Prayer

As the crackdown against the protesters escalated throughout the country, the Chin people have turned to prayers for peace and an end to the incessant violence in Burma. Special prayer services started in Hakha on 28 September and continued on a daily basis into the month of October. By 7 October, the prayer services had grown from 50 participants to more than 5,000 and spread to 49 congregations throughout Hakha Township.



Arrests Continue

Now, months later, with the large-scale protests suspended and the world's attention drifting away from Burma, the crackdown and oppression by the military regime continues. Searches for protest participants has reportedly intensified throughout Chin State, with the authorities relying on pictures and videos recorded during the protests to identify participants. Members of the NLD and active student leaders are particularly targeted. Chin students who participated in the protests were given failing marks and many are afraid to return to University fearing arrest by the military. The threat of arrest and detention has caused many Chin protest participants to flee Burma. The number of Chin forced to leave due to their participation in the protests remains unknown.

SOLIDARITY IN EXILE

In addition to participating in protests and activities of support inside Burma, the Chin community in exile has been particularly active in demonstrating solidarity with those inside Burma. Chin communities all over the world continue to organize and participate in protests, rallies, prayer vigils, and other acts of solidarity.

■ India

Mizoram State

In India's northeastern state of Mizoram where some 80,000 Chin people live in exile, demonstrations of support have continued on a consistent basis since the start of the protests in Burma.

Supported by their Mizo brothers and sisters in Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram State, Chin activists rallied against military rule in Burma in the beginning of October. Over 600 Chin turned out on 2 October to support the protesters in Burma. The rally organizers, the Human Rights Law and Development Network, also issued resolutions calling for peaceful change in Burma and review of India's policy on Burma. The Mizoram Committee for Democracy in Burma (MCDB), a Mizo civil society group, followed up on these earlier demands in a statement issued on the fourth week of October to India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urging him to review India's ties with the regime.



Demonstrations in Mizoram, October 2007

The demonstrations were supported by organized prayer services in Aizawl. On 22 October, 400 Chin and Mizo Christians representing 19 church congregations fasted and prayed together for the protesters and peaceful change in Burma during a nine-hour prayer service organized by the Lai fellowship in Aizawl. The prayer services have continued on monthly basis in Aizawl with 15 churches pledging to maintain dedicated services until democracy in Burma is achieved.



Delhi

In Delhi, which supports a population of over 2,000 Chin refugees, protests have been ongoing since August. In the early days of the protests, activists in Delhi expressed solidarity during a rally on 23 August 2007. Protests continued into September, when two hundred pro-democracy activists gathered outside Jantar Mantar Park to condemn the regime's crackdown against the protesters in Burma on 7 September. Three days later, prayer services were organized calling for peaceful, democratic change in Burma. Late September was marked by hundreds of people gathering outside the Indian Parliament in Delhi protesting Indian investments in Burma and calling for an end to the violence in Burma.



Demonstrations in Delhi, October 2007

The protests in Delhi continued into October as more than 600 Chins marched outside the Parliament building on 1 October. The protesters were joined by India's former Prime Minister I. K. Gujral and former Minister of Defense George Fernandez. Condemning the Burmese regime for its brutality against its people, the community issued several demands to the Generals in Burma as well as the government of India. On 6 October, during the international day of solidarity for Burma, a candle light vigil was held at the India Gate sponsored by Burma Solidarity Group and attended by more than 200 supporters.

■ Malaysia

In Malaysia, which supports a population of over 26,000 Chin, thousands have participated in demonstrations of solidarity. On 28 September, 3,000 people led by the All Burma Democratic Force (ABDF), an umbrella group representing several ethnic groups of Burma, protested in front of the Burma embassy. The protesters also visited the Chinese and Russian Embassies and presented a memorandum at each urging an end the conflict in Burma. Protests continued into October with more demonstrations outside the Burma embassy and a prayer vigil in front of the KLCC building in downtown Kuala Lumpur.

■ Resettled Communities

Benefiting from resettlement and asylum programs, large Chin communities have developed in host countries all across the world. Despite the distance from their homeland, the resettled communities have expressed support and solidarity with their family, friends, and people inside Burma since the beginning of the protests. Demonstrations, prayer services, and candle-light vigils sprang up across the world with the Chin community well-represented. Demonstrations and vigils have taken place in London, Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, India, the Irish Republic, New Zealand, Norway, South Korea, Spain, Thailand and the US.



Demonstration in Thailand, October 2007



WORDS OF SUPPORT

In addition to these activities, Chin organizations, including the Chin National Council, the Women's League of Chinland, the Chin Baptist Fellowship of America, the Chin National League for Democracy (Exile), and others, issued statements, echoing the demands of the protesters: for the SPDC to release political prisoners, engage in tripartite dialogue with political opposition groups, ethnic leaders, and others, to end oppressive economic policies and practices, and to end the violence against the protesters in Burma. Below are some statements issued by Chin organizations calling for peaceful change in Burma.²

STATEMENT OF SUPPORT ON THE PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT FOR DEMOCRACY IN BURMA

The Chin community based in New Delhi, India strongly supports the ongoing people's movement for democracy against the military regime in Burma, spurred by the sudden and arbitrary rise in fuel prices on 19 August, 2007 and sharply condemns the SPDC's crackdown and killing of peaceful protesters and religious leaders in Burma. In support of the people, we call on the SPDC to lay down their arms, release the innocently imprisoned, and allow all those in Burma to live in peace and dignity.

We highly salute the courage and brave sentiment of the people for rising up for restoration of democracy against the military regime and deeply honor the sacrifices of lives in the hand the wicked soldiers for the sake of the nation. We further encourage the people in Burma to march ahead until the struggle for freedom, justice and democracy is achieved and the military regime is collapsed and people's power is reinstated in Burma.

We strongly condemn the arrest of two of our Chin elected MPs Pu Cin Sian Thang of the Zomi National Congress (ZNC) and Pu Thawng Kho Thang of the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD) on 27th September, 2007. We assume that the arrest of Pu Cin Sian Thang and Pu Thawng Kho Thang and other nationalities leaders is the SPDC's tactical means to destroy the integration of the ethnic nationalities at large. Hence, we demand the immediate release of the two Chin MPs and other political prisoners.

We strongly urge the Government of India to support the people's struggle for transforming Burma from the military dictatorship rule to the people's sovereign democracy rule, not by looking its economic gain, but by hearing the out-crying voices of the people in Burma, as India is the largest democracy country in the world and the immediate neighboring country of Burma.

We also urge ASEAN, European Union, United Nations and the international communities to support the people's movement for democracy and give stern pressure on the military regime for transition of Burma into the people's sovereign democracy country.

Date: October 01, 2007
Chin Community (New Delhi)

²Please note not all statements issued by Chin organizations or community groups were available or in English.



RESOLUTIONS MADE AT AIZAWL RALLY

Human Rights and Law Network

2 October 2007

We, the people assembled in favor of democracy in Burma on October 2, 2007 in Aizawl:

1. Whole heartedly support the peaceful demonstrators for the restoration of democracy in Burma.
2. Strongly condemn the military junta in Burma for its attempt to suppress innocent civilians and monks, who are trying to restore democracy, with great impunity.
3. Agree that restoration of democracy in Burma is the only solution to human rights violation in that country.
4. Demand that India, being the largest democracy in the world, must take strong initiative action for the restoration of democracy in her neighbouring country, i.e. Burma.
5. Plead that India must establish commercial relationship with Burma only when democracy is restored in the country.
6. Demand that Indian Embassy in Yangon must be opened for the safety of the lives of democratic peace demonstrators.
7. Insist that UN envoy and rapporteur should not only try to negotiate with military authorities, but also with the leaders of various ethnic nationalities in Burma.
8. Understand the problems of supporters for restoration of democracy in Burma and if they are forcibly suppressed by the military junta, agree to provide hospitality to those who might come to Mizoram for physical safety

Statement of WLC on Junta's Arrest of Peaceful Demonstrators

29 August 2007

1. We, the Women's League of Chinland, condemn Burma's military regime for its unreasonable increase of fuel prices, which is causing extreme hardship for ordinary people.
2. We also condemn the Junta's ongoing arrests during 22nd to onwards August 2007¹ of activists who were peacefully demonstrating against the economic mismanagement of the regime.
3. We condemn the regime for making the lives of women insecure whether they are at home or on the streets, in Rangoon or other parts of Burma.
4. We strongly condemn the arrest and harassment of unarmed women demonstrators who were followed by the regime's gangs to their residences and raided at night, a time of increased vulnerability for women.
5. We are concerned for the security of the women and the consequences for the families of the women who have been arrested, detained and harassed.
6. We demand that Burma's military regime release all these women, prominent student activists Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Kyi and other student activists and allow people to practise freedom of expression in Burma.
7. We request the international community to take stronger action against the regime for harassing unarmed civilians and the United Nations Security Council to take action on Burma.
8. We request the government of India to reconsider their ties with Burma's military regime. It is a shame for India to engage with a regime that has acted so undemocratically against its own civilians.
9. We salute the spirit of the people inside Burma who are consistently fighting against the brutal regime despite the risks of being threatened, arrested, detained and tortured.

HOPE SURVIVES

The Chin people, alongside all the peoples of Burma, continue to support the wider movement for peace through actions, words, and prayers. Someday all the people of Burma will be able to live in a land of freedom, peace, and prosperity. It is this hope that has been the driving force of ongoing protests, rallies, demonstrations, marches, and prayer vigils. As evidenced by the courage and perseverance of all the peoples of Burma, this hope cannot be extinguished by guns, bars, or poverty. Hope survives.



Chin Human Rights Organization

* CHRO is non-governmental, not for profit organization legally registered in Canada with branch offices in New Delhi and Aizawl, India and in the United States. CHRO is working to protect and promote the rights of the Chin people inside and outside of Burma. Over the years, CHRO has paid regular visits to India and Malaysia to assist and coordinate advocacy activities with the Chin community and other NGOs.

CHRO and the Chin people need your support. To support CHRO in this important work, please contact one of our offices:

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