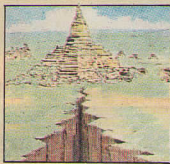


LETTERS

Meeting Saw Maung

To the editors of Asiaweek



General Saw Maung's claim that he "saved Burma" [INTERVIEW, January 27] is laughable. His régime's assurances to

foreigners that there will be fair elections is sickening. The killing of thousands of people by the armed forces is a black mark that will never be forgiven or forgotten by the Burmese people.

I want to ask the officers and men of the armed forces: Innocent and unarmed people were demonstrating for their democratic rights and you went out and shot them down. Worse, you dragged them away and buried them like dogs. How could you do this to your own people, whose care and welfare were entrusted to you by the father of our nation, Bogyoke Aung San?

Admittedly you acted under orders. But today you are still unrepentant and you continue to harass and oppress our people.

Think for a moment — for yourselves. Bogyoke Aung San always admonished you to lead and protect the people, who were to place their trust in you. How long can you hold out and suppress 39 million people? The spirit of freedom may be suppressed for a little time; it can never be extinguished.

HENRY SOE-WIN
Thornlie, WA, Australia

■ Saw Maung contradicts himself. On one hand he says of Burmese expatriates: "They are welcome to return on a visit now and again. There are some who committed crimes and ran away. I can't accept those." On the other hand, when asked if he is concerned about reprisals against himself and others by a future democratic government, he replies: "Burmese don't do this."

Perhaps Saw Maung is not a true Burmese.

SELIM AHMED
Chittagong, Bangladesh

■ "Saw Maung on Friends and Enemies" [INTERVIEW, February 3] is particularly interesting for Saw Maung's comment on ethnic insurgency: "We have no plans whatsoever for a ceasefire." This means the military posture towards the non-Burman insurgent groups remains the traditional one

of total elimination and continued "Burmanisation" — an appropriate commitment by Saw Maung, since without it he would not be in power long.

In "The Waiting Game" [INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, February 10], you report that Brig.-Gen. Myint Aung is said to have declared: "You can forget about democracy. Even if you have an elected government, we will stage a coup again." It should be clear to all the democratic elements in Burma that anyone who hopes to achieve democracy through the general election promised by the military is indulging in wishful thinking.

SAI MYO WIN
Uetersen, Federal Republic of Germany

■ Since 1962 Ne Win has shown himself to be very good at surrounding himself with yes men. He has a keen sense of when to make a decision to eliminate potential enemies — people intelligent enough to say no to him. He knows how to recruit only the dumb, the inarticulate, those without any reasoning ability. He knows he will stay in power as long as the army is not intelligent enough to stand against him.

FRANK T. OO
Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.

Taste of Steel

"An Industry Back On Its Feet" [BUSINESS, December 23-30] doesn't give a balanced picture of the background of the planning for the Perwaja project.

As far back as the 1970s Malaysia's shortage of construction steel bars and rods was so severe that the construction industry was even willing to pay for them on a cash-on-delivery basis. The shortage was due not only to limited domestic capacity but to strong international demand for steel. A government review then showed the country's capacity for the production of primary steel was very limited. Most of the rolling mills depended on imported steel billets and recyclable scraps, or imported scraps for further processing to steel billets.

Steel rods and bars are very basic for development. The government considered it imperative that primary steel production capacity be increased to avoid over-dependence on imported steel billet/scrap, which in time of need is obtainable with difficulty and at very high cost. A study conducted with the assistance of an international consultant recommended an integrated steel plant be set up.

Acting on the recommendations of

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many Japanese just saw it as a bonus long weekend. Says Murakami: "Every major skiing spot was overbooked. One travel agent told me that since the middle of last week the number of Japanese travellers flying overseas from Narita Airport was up about 20-30%."

History comes in many guises, as editors and correspondents at this magazine well know. Most weeks we simply report it, as with our coverage of the Emperor. But from time to time we also make it. This occurrence is rarer than you might think. In a sense, for instance, it is historic when we obtain an interview with a major figure who normally doesn't talk to the news media. This we did with Burma's Gen. Saw Maung, who spoke to us at length in January. But in truth, that was the general making history, not us. We simply took down what he said.

No, we felt much more that we had made history a few weeks later. As you may remember, we printed key excerpts from the three-hour interview in our Jan. 27 issue. The following week, we ran a major survey piece on Burma's political situation with the heading "Opening Up to the World," plus some more comments from the general.

The next month, we were not overly surprised to learn that *The Working People's Daily*, now Rangoon's only newspaper (published in English and Burmese editions), had on Feb. 5 reprinted our initial interview verbatim in both languages. Our eyebrows went up a bit, though, when we noted that the paper had included our somewhat frank introduction, summing up the recent bloody events. Moreover, the interview directly addressed that most sensitive of questions about Burma's enigmatic strongman of 26 years: "Is Ne Win still in power behind the scenes?" To see such topics aired even in this manner was unprecedented in Rangoon.

But it was a week later when history was more or less officially made. The event elicited a 250-word report on Feb. 13 from the Associated Press, which maintains a full-time correspondent in Rangoon. The item began: "The state-owned media, which for 26 years has denied Burmese access to critical foreign news reports, reprinted yesterday an article from *Asiaweek* magazine that contained criticism of the military government." Yes, that was news. So simple a development — positively laughable in more free-wheeling jurisdictions — yet so stunning in the Burmese context. The article, of course, was our survey story. The AP went on: "The article quoted some Burmese as saying they distrusted the government, and were sceptical of its promise to hold free and fair elections. It cited allegations by Amnesty International and other Western groups of continuing human rights abuses,

including the alleged arrests of students recently returned home after having fled the military crackdown last September . . . In the past, Burmese could see such foreign news reports only by obtaining mimeographed copies from foreign embassies in Rangoon."

When we got hold of the Feb. 12 *Working People's Daily*, we found a patchwork of *Asiaweek* covers decorating what the paper described as, and indeed was, "the full text" of the article. There were, however, a couple of small italicised caveats at the bottom of the reprint. One referred to our description of Zar Gana, a detainee whose case has been raised by Amnesty International, as a "dentistry student and part-time satirist." Said the *WPD*: "Zar Gana is a dental surgeon and he graduated from the Institute of Dental Medicine in 1985. So he is not a dentistry student as mentioned in the article, it is learnt."

We were prepared to accept this, but then we came to the other caveat. It dealt with our reporting that a son of Saw Maung was "based in New York with the foreign service." Replied the *WPD*: "It is mentioned at one point in this article that one of the sons of . . . General Saw Maung is working in New York. It is learnt that this is not true at all." This assertion remains most interesting. Saw Maung himself told us that his son was working for the Foreign Office. Our information, since reconfirmed, was that the son was posted in New York at the time of the interview. We have asked Rangoon for clarification, but so far have received no reply. Burma-watchers may draw what they will.

In the next day's issue, a reprint of Saw Maung's further comments appeared. But the *WPD* wasn't finished with *Asiaweek*. On Feb. 15, its long-running column of, er, nation-building dialogue between two folk characters focussed on our survey story. Chipathar asked Pakhanthar what he thought of it:

PAKHANTHAR: Since it was written by a group of correspondents who visited Rangoon and interviewed people, it contains both what is true and what is false. Once the *Asiaweek* wrote only what was not true and so it may be said that, on the whole it has made considerable progress . . .

CHIPATHAR: I agree with you. Once this magazine acted as the mouthpiece of the insurgents and destructive elements and wrote news and articles in their favour and some called it "Asia Weak" instead of *Asiaweek* and some even named it "Asia Wicked."

The two went on to espouse various aspects of the current line, in the same way they always have. Was *Asiaweek*-style reporting a one-day wonder? So far, yes. The *WPD* remains in, er, nation-building phase. Perhaps, however, a little more history will yet be made in Burma. ■

PERSPECTIVE

Hit Parade

Excerpts from help explain fury over (see INTERNATIONAL)

Headlines seemed with reports of violence part of the Muslim the hostage drama at showed no signs of a "heretics" took over Mosque for several days demonstrators burned bussy. Indians anger siege set fire to ve and fought police. many non-Muslim around the world [suddenly] seemed facial, irrational — impossible to live with.

But was that, as moderate and radical Muslims insisted, an expression spread largely a truculent West committed to protect its norms of civilisation fact the Koran stipulates kindness to all and sharing of wealth with poor. It specifically demands good relations with the "People of the Book" — Jews, Christians, whose prophets are honoured Muslims. Like all ideologies it has come of time and spawned actions. Muslim leaders challenge for Islam to problems as it is for with Islam.

A good deal of the has developed in recent by Muslims as the direct coexisted with Jews and relative peace until politicised the area of reordered things to suit

terests. Islam abhors national all Muslims as brethren geographical divisions. movements for Pakistan and inevitable focal points that saw its survival predatory outside force perceiving the West as its interests. This feeling political and cultural it was a reaction to der