

*Authorities drag feet on election pledge but react to foreign criticism*

# Masterful inaction

By Bertil Lintner in Rangoon.

**F**our months after Gen. Saw Maung's bloody coup on 18 September, Rangoon appears calm. The military presence has been reduced to a token force, buses are running normally and business is brisk in well-stocked shops and markets. The dusk to dawn curfew has been relaxed to run from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m.

But the capital's outward tranquility is deceptive. The city's teashops are crammed with idle young people full of bitter memories of the 8-11 August and 18-20 September killings by the military of hundreds — perhaps thousands — of people during a nationwide, student-led uprising.

Burma's universities suspended classes after anti-government demonstrations in June 1988, and all schools were closed on 9 August. During the turbulent month that followed, mass rallies and other anti-government activities kept the students busy.

When asked about Rangoon's peaceful mood, a resident said: "It's only on the surface. Underneath, we're all waiting for the next big thing to happen." However, no one seems to know what the next big thing will be. Diplomats and Burmese sources assert that Saw Maung's military government is widely hated and that only a fear of being shot is keeping people off the streets.

Part of the Burmese tragedy is that the authorities are still clinging to the myth that those killed by the troops last year after the coup were "looters and other unsavoury elements" and that the army saved the country from a "communist conspiracy."

"The military is incapable of understanding the sensitivities of its own people," an analyst said. "A reconciliation is unlikely as long as the ruling junta ignores the deeper causes of dissatisfaction. Burmese society today is deeply divided and, hence, still potentially explosive."

The only event capable of breaking the impasse and creating a rapport of sorts between the military and the public is the holding of general elections, which were promised by the military authorities last September. Brig.-Gen. Khin Nyunt, secretary to the ruling State Law and Order Restoration

Council (SLORC), told visiting foreign journalists on 20 January that no date for elections had been set. And he gave no indication of whether they would be held this year or next.

Instead he alleged that "antagonism" among Burma's 182 registered political parties was the main reason why law and order could not be said to have been restored — a requirement set by the SLORC that must be met before any elections. In the meantime, the SLORC has pledged to improve the country's poor standard of living and to regularise its shaky transport system.

The political parties accuse the military of deliberately delaying the elections and hindering their activities. The National League for Democracy (NLD), Burma's main opposition party, has written to the SLORC asking it to set an elections date, but it has received no response.

The military regime has also come under fire for allegedly arresting 13 NLD workers who, in December 1988, helped organise a trip to Mon state for the league's popular

National Unity Party (NUP) — which ruled the country for 26 years under the name of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) — is having severe difficulties in re-establishing its former influence. Officially, the military is not supposed to involve itself in politics, but the NUP's leading cadres, including its chairman Tha Kyaw, are all former BSPP men with close army connections.

"Out in the countryside, the old BSPP people are back, sitting in the same chairs, in the same offices, doing the same jobs," a Burmese source said. "In that sense, there's no difference."

Recently, the SLORC prohibited political parties from putting up signboards at offices below township level. The official explanation was that it "would look so ugly if all the 182 parties put up such signboards in a small village." The real reason for the limitation, diplomatic and Burmese sources say, is that the military, having tacitly conceded defeat in the urban areas, is trying to preserve village support for the NUP.

The deep divisions between the opposition parties on the one hand and the NUP on the other, and the military government's delaying tactics and meddling in politics, have pushed some Rangoon residents to consider returning to the streets in protest if the SLORC continues its policy of what they call "masterful inaction." Given the preparedness of the armed forces, it is unlikely such rallies will be held any time soon.

Meanwhile, the government's decision to invite 46 Bangkok-based Thai and foreign journalists to Burma may signal a new openness on the part of the country's traditionally reclusive authorities. The

18-20 January press tour was the first of its kind since the army seized power in 1962.

The tour came after international criticism of the government's alleged mistreatment of students returning from Burmese-Thai border areas, where they fled after last year's rebellion.

An estimated 7-8,000 students and other pro-democracy activists fled cities and towns across the country after Saw Maung took power and began cracking down on the rebellion. Between 1,900 and 2,000 students



**Soldiers in Rangoon: widely disliked.**

general secretary, Aung San Suu Kyi. During a recent tour of the Irrawaddy Delta region, southwest of Rangoon, army troops fired shots in the air to disperse crowds which had come out to greet her. Brig.-Gen. Myint Aung, the region's army commander, is accused of ordering the arrest of NLD organisers and having electricity and water supplies to the party's local headquarters cut.

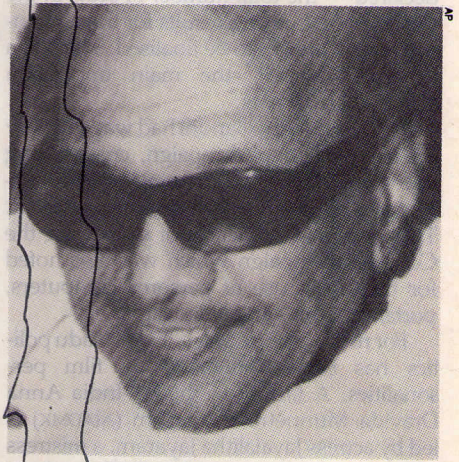
While the NLD has emerged as the strongest opposition force from among Burma's plethora of new political parties, the



## The Congress party is trounced in Tamil Nadu Setback in the south

By Salam Ali in New Delhi

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's Congress party suffered a severe defeat in the 21 January state elections in Tamil Nadu, but recovered some ground by winning majorities in the two eastern states of Mizoram and Nagaland. But while the tiny eastern states bordering on Burma and Bangladesh are strategically important, they have little influence on national politics. On the other hand, populous Tamil Nadu — the



**Karunanidhi: confident.**

bastion of Dravidian regionalism — is seen as a crucial state by analysts. A Congress victory there could have paved the way for further inroads in three other southern states now ruled by opposition parties.

Opinions vary on how defeat in Tamil Nadu will affect the Congress nationally. A general election is due by December and Congress leaders, including Gandhi, had hoped to call a snap poll by April if the Congress had done well in Tamil Nadu. The rout has quashed their hopes.

In the attempt to win at all costs, the Congress resorted to some less than wholesome tactics and in the process tarnished its credentials as a secular party. In Mizoram, where almost all voters are Christians, the emphasis was on Christianity. On his hustings Gandhi dwelt on the non-Christian refugee influx from Bangladesh and its impact on the Indian states along the border. In Nagaland, he switched tactics to exploit Naga chauvinism, especially the emotive issue of Nagaland's boundary dispute with

have since returned home of their own accord, and about 300 others have been flown back from a Thai military-run repatriation centre at Tak.

The US State Department said on 5 January that as many as 50 students who had returned on their own have been arrested and some have died in custody. The London-based human-rights organisation Amnesty International said on 10 January that the Thai authorities were forcing students to return from Tak. A group of about 20 students staged a hunger strike there before they were sent back to Rangoon on 7 January.

Thus the press tour was an attempt to discredit such reports and improve the Saw Maung government's badly tarnished international image, which led to a decision on 13 January by Tokyo to suspend indefinitely all aid to Rangoon. Japan, previously Burma's largest aid donor, gave ¥9.5 billion (US\$75 million) to Burma in grants during the fiscal year ending 31 March 1988 and a further ¥3.7 billion (US\$29 million) between then and the suspension.

Prior to Japan's decision, the US, Britain,

West Germany and Australia suspended aid to demonstrate their disapproval of the killing of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of mostly unarmed demonstrators in Rangoon and elsewhere on 8-11 August and following Saw Maung's takeover.

The tour included meetings with student returnees in Loikaw, in Kayah state, Taunggyi, in Shan state, at an air base in Meiktila and in the Rangoon Command's headquarters north of the capital. Major urban centres were avoided, and plainclothes policemen kept up a close watch over the journalists throughout the tour.

When interviewed in the presence of officials, the vast majority of students assured the journalists that they had come back voluntarily and had not been maltreated. Privately, however, several students expressed fear for their safety and said they had been coerced into returning home. During one meeting, a student pressed a note into the hand of one journalist that read: "We do think that if we give things as they really are, then just on the way back or afterwards we may be seized and beaten." ■

## BURMA 2

### Foreign businessmen sceptical about investment law

## Wait and see

The government's new liberal foreign investment law, issued on 30 November 1988, may be doomed to failure unless fundamental changes are made. An additional list of procedures relating to the law was issued on 7 December 1988 which stipulated, among other things, that foreign currency must be transferred through the Myanma Foreign Trade Bank, an institution not renowned for its speed and efficiency. There is no foreign banking system in Burma.

Another major shortcoming of the law is the absence of any clear reference to arbitration. A military-appointed foreign investment committee has been given authority to deal with such matters, but foreign businessmen are concerned about what will happen to the committee once the "temporary" military regime is replaced by a freely elected government.

Until the new law was promulgated, the only foreign company allowed to set up a joint venture in Burma was the West German engineering firm Fritz Werner, which makes high-grade machinery for manufacturing weapons for the Burmese army. Major investors have generally adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

Overseas business deals Rangoon has made recently include those in logging, precious stones and fishing, which will provide badly needed foreign exchange for the gov-

ernment without any real risk for the companies involved.

Six Thai companies have secured logging rights to 4.7 million tonnes of logs. The concessions will run for three years, with each company required to fell at least 50,000 tonnes of logs a year.

Bangkok-based Thip Tharn Thong has signed a contract to barter US\$10 million of used cars and machinery in exchange for Burmese gems, jade and pearls, and a Japanese company, Taiyo Gyogyo, has contracted to fish for shrimp in Burmese waters on a trial basis.

In addition, the South Korean giant Daewoo recently signed an agreement with the Burmese authorities for the sale of railway equipment to Burma, and Australian interests are looking into the hotel business in Rangoon.

In December 1988, Burma began allowing a limited number of tourists into the country again after suspending tourism during last year's rebellion.

But major industrial investors are still cautious. The main obstacle for economic development in Burma is the still unsettled political situation. A diplomat said: "Until the general elections have been held, the outcome is clear and is likely to provide stability, few foreign companies will dare invest large sums in permanent projects in Burma." ■ **Bertil Lintner**



## BOOKS

## To Three Pagodas Pass and back

**To the River Kwai: Two Journeys, 1943, 1979** by John Stewart. Bloomsbury, London. £13.95 (US\$24.60).

**Borderlines: A Journey in Thailand and Burma** by Charles Nicholl. Secker & Warburg, London. £10.95.

John Stewart and Charles Nicholl both describe very personal journeys in the peripheral areas of Thailand and across the border in Burma, but there the similarities end. Nicholl belongs to a younger generation of writers who appear to have drawn much of their inspiration from Jack Kerouac. Stewart is one of the few survivors of the notorious Sankurai POW camp on the Siam-Burma railway, the building of which was one of the most shameful undertakings in modern war history.

During that time, he kept a diary which in itself is a unique historical document. Thirty-six years later, he travels back to the same places he so vividly described in its pages. The Japanese are gone of course, but war continues. Stewart teams up with anti-Rangoon guerrillas from the Mon ethnic minority, who help him find an old steel

railway bridge at Apalon, down the smugglers' route from the rugged Three Pagodas Pass.

His return was an occasion for reflections "on an inescapable memory and its pivotal place in the life of the survivors." By juxtaposing sequences from his diaries with his travel account, Stewart evokes the people and the places — and the contrasts shaped by time and development — in a way which even the uninitiated reader will find fascinating. Only when he reaches the last stretch of jungle before Three Pagodas Pass does the unavoidable anguish make itself felt: "For the first time I sense a profound, even disturbing familiarity with my surroundings."

But even those surroundings had disappeared by the time he had finished writing his book, buried by the waters of a new dam or devastated by Thai timber companies. The River Kwai familiar to Stewart and other POW builders of the "death railway" is no more. Only memories are left, and Stewart's book elegantly preserves these in the form of his own recorded impressions and his reflec-

tions on them almost four decades later.

Nicholl's book, by contrast, does not ring true. The pedant will object to his frequent references to canned Kloster beer — which actually only comes in bottles — and will note that Three Pagodas Pass and Doi Lang are incorrectly marked on the map. Tu Ja, the Kachin he meets, is not a jade trader but a dentist by profession who serves as the foreign relations officer for the rebel constellation, the National Democratic Front. "Dixon," the potbellied Australian journalist who addresses people as "sport" and jabs their chests with his beer cans at Lucy's Tiger Den in Bangkok, is presumably the fit sportsman and academic Tony Davis.

Buddhist forest temples are introduced on page nine, AIDS on page 10, a German tourist-cum-sex maniac on page 40 and opium warlord Khun Sa on page 68. Katai, a sweet and unconvincingly articulate girl picked up at a hotel in Bangkok, acts as his companion, spiritual guide and interpreter of Thai culture. The journey itself is far from extraordinary; it is the kind which thousands of tourists make every year.

But even as one winces at the clichés, one has to admit that the book is remarkably well written and at times also entertaining, which only goes to show that a way with words can make even an uneventful journey sound interesting.

■ Bertil Lintner

### LETTERS

#### Protecting Burma's returnees

In the aftermath of Gen. Saw Maung's 18 September 1988 coup, thousands of young Burmese students fled for fear of mass arrests, torture, and summary execution. At its height, the exodus to the Thai-Burma border reached 10,000. Since then, hundreds have returned to Burma on the promise of non-retribution by the Burmese military regime. However, there are persistent reports of maltreatment and summary execution of both the returnees and those arrested inside Burma.

The recent "voluntary" return of some 80 Burmese students from inside Thailand needs close watching. I would suggest the following details of returnees be gathered to help protect them:

- ▶ Records of names, ages, the names of parents and guardians, their addresses, signature and dental X-rays.
- ▶ A photographic record should be kept of the returnee and the Burmese official receiving the returnee.

At the least such information might reduce the incidence of unexplained "disappearances."

Washington

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Burmese students in rebel camp.

army's meddling in politics. Meanwhile, the government comes under fire for mistreating students involved in last year's rebellion, and the regime's new foreign-investment law has failed to attract much interest 10

Your reporting on Burma reveals some remarkable bias and lack of balance. Most articles are based on ill-conceived ideas which are at best half-truths. To cite an example, Bertil Lintner's report in the 17 November 1988 issue says that the Burmese Government's announcement (to permit limited companies and joint ventures between local and foreign private firms or governments) has not evoked any great enthusiasm among foreign businessmen or governments. This is totally untrue and I am astounded by this kind of slanderous reporting. Many private firms, local as well as foreign, are responding to the government's announcement with great enthusiasm.

Small wonder Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore had publicly censured the REVIEW some months ago. I'm sure correspondents like Lintner are the cause of Lee's outrage.

Anyway, journalism is a noble profession. If it was practised according to its cherished ethics, instead of being an instrument of politics and power struggles or to make a fast buck, this world would be a wonderful place to live in.

Rangoon

KYIWIN

I read with interest the letter by Soh Min [29 Dec. '88]. Burma is a timebomb and I fully agree with him that we should all do our best to help Burma before it is too late. Unfortunately for Southeast Asians, this region appears to be compatible with dictators — from the extreme Right or the extreme Left. The irony of it all is that we tolerate them.

Penang

ABDULLAH AHMAD