



Karen guerilla camp, southern Burma: A link-up between students and insurgents worried the military

Asiaweek Pictures

BURMA

'Unity' on All Sides

After days of frenzied bloodletting, a deadly calm had settled over Rangoon. Stunned by the army's suppression of street protest with bullet and bayonet, most Burmese stayed at home last week, venturing out only to shop. Outside, military vehicles trundled down the deserted roads: armoured cars, jeeps mounted with recoilless rifles and trucks carrying heavily armed troops. The soldiers seemed fit and in high spirits as they removed remaining bamboo barricades set up by neighbourhood vigilante bands. Downtown, there were house-to-house searches. When weapons were found, household members were arrested. Amid the tramping army boots and glistening weaponry, a few children took advantage of the empty streets to fly small, square-shaped kites.

In the downtown district, the red-

bricked Rangoon General Hospital was eerily quiet. During the bloody mayhem following the Sept. 18 military coup by Gen. Saw Maung, the hospital had treated some 500 people, most of them for gunshot and bayonet wounds inflicted by soldiers. But a week after the clashes, the wards were virtually bare. A middle-aged nurse said patients checked out as soon as their injuries were treated, fearful that troops might roll up any time to arrest or kill them. For the seriously wounded who remained, there were few facilities. Doctors were said to be buying antibiotics on the black market; minor operations were conducted without anaesthesia. A medical student in the hospital's intensive care unit bore five deep gashes on his body, including a severed artery in his right arm. He and 40 other protesters had been cut down by army gunfire near the Union Bank on

Merchant Street. "We were completely unarmed and were demonstrating peacefully," he said bitterly.

The government gave the official toll for Sept. 18-26 as 342 dead and 219 wounded, with 1,107 arrested. But it said only three of the dead and seven of the wounded were female; an Asiaweek correspondent who visited hospitals and clinics in Rangoon last week saw many more women casualties. Diplomats believe the real figures are much higher.

In the wake of the violence, more than 1,000 protesters, most of them students, were said to have fled to the jungled border areas controlled by various ethnic insurgent groups. Reports said about 700 demonstrators were staying with rebels of the Karen National Union (KNU) in various camps along the Thailand-Burma border; another 300 had made their way to the

Mon National Liberation Army's headquarters at Three Pagodas Pass, about 300 km northwest of Bangkok. An Asiaweek source said 100 others had arrived at a Shan rebel camp near the Thai border town of Mae Hong Son. The anti-



Saw Maung ^{AP}

government protesters reportedly asked the insurgents for military assistance and training.

Those developments were a clear worry for the Saw Maung government. Newspapers highlighted reports of students being murdered while trying to join the rebels. At the same time, the government said it was engaged in fierce fighting with about 1,500 Burmese Communist Party guerrillas in northeastern Shan State, which borders China. Another insurgent attack by the KNU was reported at Maethawaw in the south. Sources in Rangoon said that with the border situation apparently worsening, troops had been moved from the now-subdued capital to the south. They said the junta had given priority to consolidating Rangoon, Mandalay, Moulmein and Meiktila against rebel activity, even at the cost of allowing the opposition to retain footholds in other cities. Clashes between people and soldiers were reported in the southern towns of Mergui and Tavoy.

For Rangoon's nascent opposition leaders, the military's takeover from civilian president Maung Maung had been a jarring blow. It had come just as they were moving towards a coherent platform after a faltering start. Last week they regrouped. Top dissidents Aung San Suu Kyi, Tin U and Aung Gyi launched the League for Democracy (LD) to band together students, workers and monks fighting for democracy. Appointed general secretary was Aung San Suu Kyi (*see interview*), while Tin U and Aung Gyi were named chairman and vice-chairman respectively. Among other things, the League manifesto called for a continuation of the weeks-long general strike and the release of jailed demonstrators. But it did not demand a full accounting of the dead in the coup-inspired army killings — an omission, some said, that suggested potential for an accommodation with the ruling group.

Indeed, the dissident trio seemed to be moving towards a reversal of their pledge to boycott promised multi-party polls. "The opposition is getting closer and closer to being able to take part in the elections," said a diplomatic source. He was confident that associates of ex-general Tin U had

INTERVIEW/AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Hanging in There

Slim and attractive Aung San Suu Kyi, 43, emerged as a leading opposition figure in Burma purely by chance. The London-based academic was visiting her ailing mother in Rangoon when anti-government protests erupted in July. As the daughter of Aung San, Burma's revered resistance hero, she found herself becoming the symbol of people's hope for democracy. Swept along by the tide of events, Aung San Suu Kyi joined hands with top dissidents Tin U and Aung Gyi. On Sept. 24, the trio formed the National Democratic United League, later renamed the League for Democracy. Its aim: uniting pro-democracy forces in the country against the recently installed military régime. Next day, Aung San Suu Kyi spoke with an Asiaweek correspondent. Excerpts from the interview:

Why was the opposition initially so disorganised?

It was difficult to organise in the beginning because it was a movement that started from the people — an upsurge — and one felt very hesitant about coming forward and saying, "Right, we'll tell you what to do."

Who is in this new league?

U Tin U, U Aung Gyi and myself. We decided it's time we had a proper organisation from which we can direct the democratic process . . . We will invite [ex-premier] U Nu if he would like to come in. We'll invite people either as individuals or as groups. The students will, I hope, support the union. I'm sure they will because we're all working for the same thing. We just want to have a more cohesive sort of organisation so that we can move more effectively.

How true are reports that the ethnic insurgent groups have offered help to the opposition movement?

We have heard the same stories. We have had no contact with the insurgents . . . We should strive for internal peace for the country, but I'm not in favour of encouraging people to contact the insurgents and involve them in this movement. I think that basically the people of Burma are capable of resolving their own problems. If we are

united, we should be able to achieve what we want.

Some insurgents claim they've been fighting for democracy for 40 years.

Well, they don't seem to have succeeded. I think the students have achieved a lot more . . . The reason why the movement has been so successful is because everybody has been united in their demands. People say the opposition is divided, but the unity is incredible. After all, who has ever achieved 100% unity? The great majority of the people are behind the movement and that's an incredible amount of unity, especially in a country where we have never been allowed to form organisations to express our political opinions.

What about the practicalities of holding proposed elections in Burma?

It's something that would take some time, if the government is really going to hold them properly. One wonders whether one can organise general elections within three months. I very much doubt it.

What are your chances of remaining united?

We don't want the opposition to split up and I think there is a great chance we will remain united, especially since the developments last week [the Sept. 18 military coup and killings that followed]. People feel they really can't carry on beneath a government which is so irresponsible about their well-being.

Have you tried to contact strongman Ne Win?

It's not possible [for us] to contact him. We don't know where he is, what he is doing, how much contact he has with the present lot [in power]. Officially, he's nowhere in the picture [but] the general feeling is that if there's something sinister going on, he must be behind it.

What would be your involvement in any future government?

I really can't say at this point. A lifetime in politics does not appeal to me, but how long is a lifetime? Obviously once you start a movement like this, you don't stop halfway and say, "That's it, I've had enough." You just stay there until it reaches a logical conclusion of some kind. ■



Aung San Suu Kyi ^{Asiaweek Pictures}



Asiaweek Pictures

Patrolling the capital: For the ruling party, "same whisky, new label"

already made contact with the military régime on the issue. "If we do not acknowledge this government and their process, we will be automatically discounted," an LD aide was quoted as saying. "Our position is to beat them at their own game." Ex-premier U Nu, who had created a rift in the opposition by declaring an abortive provisional government in August, also seemed to be moving towards supporting the LD if it opted for participation. Sources said he had sent out feelers to the trio.

The League changed its name from the National United Front for Democracy when the old ruling party, the Burma Socialist Program Party, adopted a new, similar-sounding title on Sept. 24. In an apparent effort to refurbish its image, the BSPP renamed itself the National Unity Party, dropping any mention of the socialism espoused by founder Ne Win, the longtime strongman believed still to be holding the reins of government. Few Burmese were impressed by the BSPP's new guise. "It's like putting VAT 69 into a Johnny Walker bottle — the same whisky, new label," quipped a middle-aged worker in Rangoon.

Analysts reckoned the erstwhile BSPP, no longer the country's sole legal political grouping, wanted to reassert itself by winning the proposed elections. Ostensibly, the BSPP government was toppled on Sept. 18 by the men in olive. But diplomatic and other observers believed the putsch was staged on Ne Win's orders. The ruling military clique, they said, had simply stripped off its civilian facade. "The record shows that Ne Win has manipulated every election in Burma," asserted a Bangkok-based Burmese. "He will try to ram this election

down the people's throats too."

An opposition decision to contest the polls may not go down well with the large segment of protesters who demanded that an interim government be formed first. That was a key opposition demand put forward first to Maung Maung and later to Saw Maung. Aung San Suu Kyi had her-



Peter Dierkes

Rangoon General Hospital: Unarmed

self earlier questioned the possibility of holding free and fair elections while the military was in control. She said last week that the time was not yet right for a decision on participation.

Many Burma-watchers wondered how dissidents could conduct an election campaign amid the ubiquitous military presence in Rangoon and other major cities. In the capital, troops were concentrated along the road to the airport and around Rangoon University, a hotbed of student dissent. The army had created safe enclaves in the city, some in suburban residences close to key buildings such as the Union Bank. Barracks near the Ministry of Defence were fortified by a new red-brick wall and main streets were crisscrossed with barbed wire. Armoured cars patrolled the streets and an 8 p.m. to 4 a.m. curfew was still in force. "It was like Beirut," said a recent arrival from Rangoon dramatically, if not quite fairly.

The next test was expected to come on Monday, Oct. 3, when the deadline was to expire for striking employees to return to work. The administration dangled a carrot by promising to pay September salaries to workers who attended office, and wielded a stick by threatening suspension if they didn't. "We think the people will go back to work long enough to collect their September salaries but then will probably go back home," said one Rangoon resident. A continuation of the general strike would be a crippling blow to the administration, already threatened with near-collapse of the economy. "The strike is very important," said Aung San Suu Kyi. "No government can operate unless it can make the administrative machinery work. What we are doing is supporting the general strike."

But the immediate fate of Burma still seemed to hang on one individual. Said a Western diplomat in Bangkok: "The composition of the new government is not the issue with most people, who believe that no genuine change can occur unless Ne Win is removed." Numerous rumours in recent weeks that the 77-year-old leader had sought political asylum have all turned out to be false. When asked why his country didn't take in Ne Win, a Soviet diplomat in Rangoon shot back: "Would you in my place?" To the ex-president, the uprising was a personal affront, said one veteran observer. "Nobody has ever crossed Ne Win," he said, "and he is not about to let go of the power he has held for 26 years." But with the opposition slowly consolidating itself amid the country's continuing administrative and economic disarray, many Burmese believed a conclusion was in the offing. "I don't think the situation can continue indefinitely," said Aung San Suu Kyi. "Certainly within the next two or three weeks we should see something decisive." ■

REACTIONS

The World Slowly Awakes

The first bloodbath occurred on July 7, 1962, four months after Gen. Ne Win ousted Premier U Nu in a military coup. As thousands of protesting students gathered on the grounds of Rangoon University, Lt.-Col. Sein Lwin gave the order to shoot. An estimated 148 students died in the massacre, earning Sein Lwin the nickname of "the Butcher." The killings set the pattern of ruthlessness for future crack-downs on opposition to Ne Win's iron rule. Students were slaughtered again during a 1971 uprising at Moulmein, 170 km southeast of Rangoon; scores were gunned down by troops in the 1974 riots following the death of popular U.N. Secretary-General U Thant. Each time, the outside world watched in virtual silence.

Burma's latest turmoil, too, initially evoked notably faint international reaction, even when up to 3,000 people died in the street mayhem of Aug. 8-12. "Perhaps it's because Burma has been out of the international picture for so long," observes an Asian diplomat in Bangkok. "Nations can afford to be quiet because Burma doesn't affect them so much." Only recently have foreign governments begun voicing serious disapproval.

Among the first to speak out was West Germany. On Aug. 31, Bonn suspended all economic cooperation with Rangoon, terminating negotiations for new projects and for rescheduling the country's debt. Washington followed suit on Sept. 22 with a cut-off "for the time being" of all assistance, except for humanitarian purposes. The U.S. package of \$14 million a year is minuscule, accounting for less than 1% of Burma's foreign aid. But Washington provides valuable technological and agricultural expertise to the Burmese, as well as training for new recruits to the country's army.

The Americans' move may have been precipitated by an incident right on their doorstep Sept. 19, the day after Gen. Saw Maung's junta took over from the civil administration of President Maung Maung. Anti-government protesters swarmed through the streets of Rangoon, shouting defiance. Inside the U.S. Embassy, senior American diplomats, including Ambassador Burton Levin, watched in horror as troopers perched on rooftops across the road fired into a crowd outside. Unofficial estimates put the citywide death toll in two days at several hundred. Declared leading Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi angrily: "I would like every country in the world to recognise the fact that the people of Burma are being shot down for no reason at all."

Finally, it seemed, the world had been shaken out of its apathy. In a statement issued in Athens, the European Community's twelve member-states expressed "deep concern" over the growing wave of violence in Burma. The EC called on political and social forces in Burma to "start without delay a substantial dialogue aimed at the restoration of democracy and the holding of free multi-party elections." Australia, India and Sweden also filed protest notes to the Burmese government. Even the friendly Soviet Union said it "regards the tragic

developments in Burma with deep concern."

Two of Burma's neighbours, China and Thailand, have yet to issue formal statements. However, Peking's diplomats have expressed hopes that Rangoon would soon settle its "internal affairs." For their part, the Thais have built temporary shelters in southern Ranong Province for more than 500 Burmese refugees; fourteen Thai MPs recently participated in a protest rally outside the Burmese embassy in Bangkok. But, officially, the Thai government has adopted a wait-and-see attitude. As one Thai foreign ministry official put it: "Burma is very close to our country so we have to be careful."

If any nation could pressure the régime in Rangoon, say analysts, it is Japan, which contributes 80% of Burma's foreign aid. Not long after West Germany ended economic assistance, a leading Japanese financial journal quoted a high-ranking Japanese Foreign Ministry official as saying that Tokyo would freeze a \$248 million loan promised to Burma. No official announcement followed, however. "As to our relations with the new military government, we will be carefully



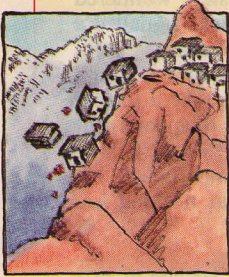
Peter Dierkes

Burmese Christians protest: A question of international leverage

watching developments," said Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Matsuda Yoshifumi last week. "We do not have any concrete conclusions vis-à-vis the government of Burma." A senior European diplomat notes that Tokyo tends to favour the U.N. principle of non-intervention in internal affairs over that of upholding the universality of human rights. "Such a stand regarding Burma," he contends, "is absolutely horrifying."

But to what extent is Burma susceptible to leverage from outside? Many Burmese believe international pressure could force the military to accept opposition demands for democracy. Others, however, reckon such measures would be insufficient to dislodge a government controlled clandestinely by the still-powerful ex-president, Ne Win. Burma's political isolation over the past 26 years, they add, has sharply reduced the influence of major powers over the country's destiny. Indeed, Burma's opposition itself is wary of outside interference. "We want moral support," Aung San Suu Kyi told Asiaweek, "but we really don't want foreigners involved in this. This is a Burmese affair." ■

LETTERS

The King of Nepal*To the editors of Asiaweek*

In "Rule from the Mountaintop" [INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, September 9], your comments on the Nepalese monarch are inaccurate, jaundiced and prejudiced. Contrary to your view, King Birendra since his accession to the throne has made it an annual practice to tour the farthest flung areas of the country, meeting people and getting acquainted with their needs and problems. The tours last about two months and have proved highly popular.

In addition, the King visits various districts in connection with development undertakings. This is in sharp contrast to your statement that he rarely tours the country or mingles with the people. You suggest the national referendum in 1980 was moulded to suit the King himself. You seem to be the only exception in imputing [such a] motive to the historic exercise, which was hailed worldwide. You even object to the King's being "seldom photographed without the trademark tinted spectacles or the traditional *topi* perched on his head."

Prince Gyanendra does not and never did control the National Sports Council. You published a photograph with a caption mentioning a parade of Nepalese legislators; none of them was a legislator. You contradict yourself by concluding with the statement that the monarchy "is the only institution that commands the people's respect." In Nepal, the King provides active leadership, while Queen Aishwarya and other royal family members are deeply involved in social activities under an umbrella body, the Social Services National Coordination Council. Queen Aishwarya is its chairman. MADHAV R. NEUPANE

Paknajol, Kathmandu, Nepal

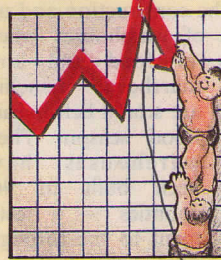
■ "Rule from the Mountaintop" is a well-researched eye-opener for the authorities at higher helms in Kathmandu. King Birendra carries two images—that of a sober institutional monarch who is above politics, and that of an autocratic ruler who takes a deep interest in day-to-

day political life.

It's quite true that he is kept aloof from his subjects by his powerful gang of three aides. They wield tremendous power [through the appointment of] the prime minister, other ministers, and high-ranking civil servants. The prime minister is 26th in the line of power. Even the King's position is a little strange. He graces state functions and attends the wedding functions of Kathmandu's elite but doesn't have time to visit earthquake victims. It is high time that royalty in Nepal took a serious interest in raising living standards in my impoverished country.

The statement that the King does not visit remote areas is incorrect. Twice a year the King goes camping in remote areas and sees development projects there.

NAME WITHHELD
Bangkok, Thailand

A Different Drug Abuse

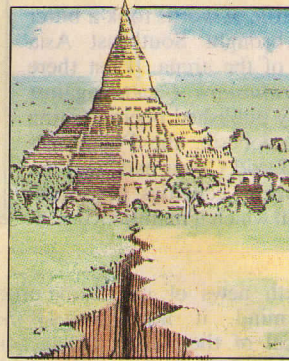
I really liked your report on the pharmaceutical trade, "Harsh Medicine for Foreign Drugs" [BUSINESS, August 26]. A friend of mine in the Philippines was given a choice by the doctor treating him for advanced pulmonary tuberculosis: six months on expensive drugs or a year on cheap ones. My friend chose the fast route to recovery. My parents' heart-condition medicines cost 230 pesos [about \$11] a week. What happens to Filipinos with no children abroad to help out with such expenses?

Also, I wish you would find out and tell us whether the government is doing something about family planning in the Philippines, my country. I read in the magazine that the population now is 58.7 million [ALMANAC, August 5]. Filipinos believe a child is a blessing from heaven, but what good is there in bringing children into a world of crime, malnutrition and poverty? MRS. ROWENA ARMAN

*Nyköping, Sweden***Uprising in Burma**

It is really unfortunate that the helpless Rohingya of Arakan [INTER-

NATIONAL AFFAIRS, September 2] have never had a breath of peace under Ne Win's BSPP régime. General Aung San, the Burmese independence leader, yielded to the pressure of racists and did not call the Rohingyas to the historic Panlong Conference on Feb. 12, 1947. It was then that the Rohingya people started their armed revolution under the leadership of Shahid Jaffar Hussain.



During the 1948-62 period, we Rohingyas fought for our political rights through the parliament. The U Nu government agreed to our demands and on July 4, 1961 two hundred mujahideen headed by Chairman

Rabi Ullah and Vice-Chairman Mustafiz Ahmed surrendered their 290 weapons. On that occasion the vice-chief of staff (infantry) of the Burmese armed forces, Brig.-Gen. Aung Gyi, now a leader of the opposition movement, declared that the Muslim people residing at Arakan were Rohingyas by race and Muslims by religion. On Nov. 15, 1961 more than two hundred armed mujahideen surrendered. On that occasion Aung Gyi, Vice-Chief of Staff (Navy) Than Pe and Frontier Regions Chief Administrator Col. Saw Myint declared in their separate speeches that the Muslims of Arakan were Rohingyas and citizens of Burma.

Today these dignitaries know how well their commitments were honoured by the fascist Ne Win. All of our political rights were curtailed by the BSPP government. Under the 1982 Citizenship Law we were declared "stateless" in our own motherland. More than 300,000 Rohingyas were evicted through Operation King Dragon, launched in 1978. Today more than 1 million of our people languish in sub-human conditions in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

MUHAMMADALI
Secretary-General

Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front
Arakan, Burma

Austral-Asia Revisited

"A Pocket Full of Doubt" [EDITORIAL, August 26] brings to mind an earlier commentary by Asiaweek. Five years ago the issue was Foreign Minister Bill Hayden's prediction that "Australia will become a Eurasian country over the next century or two. Australian Asians

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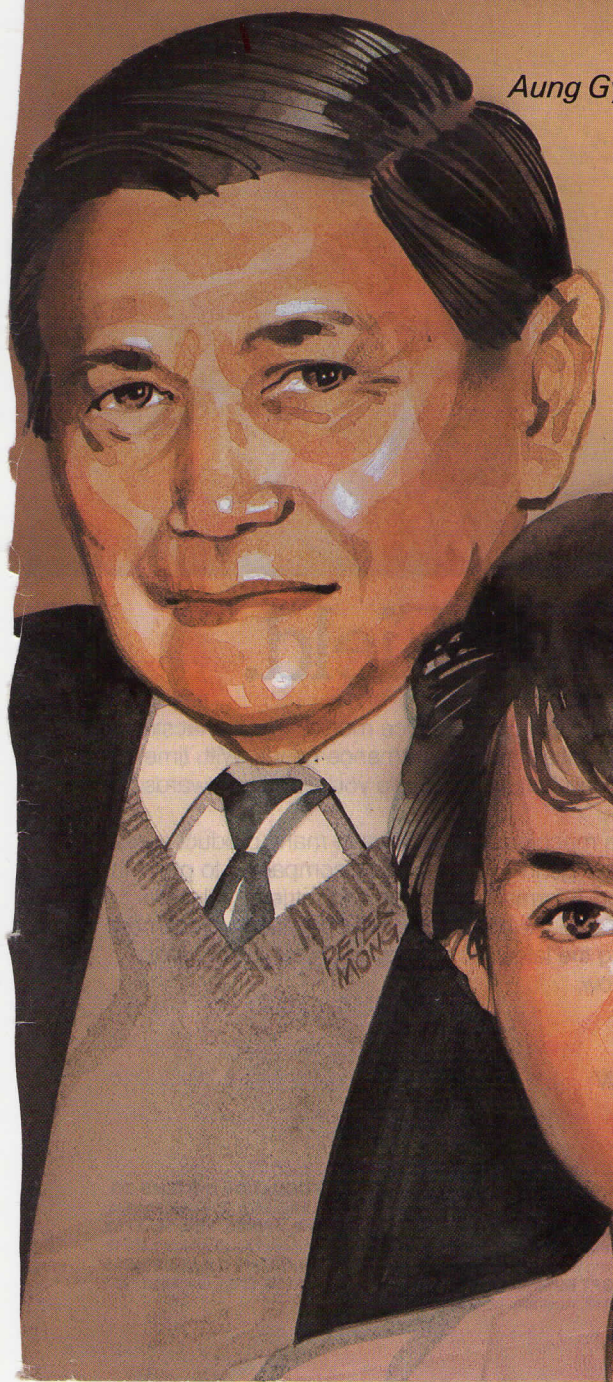
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UNDER THE GUN

What Next for Burma's Opposition?



Aung Gyi



Tin U



Aung San Suu Kyi

PETER MONG