

Student union chief emerges protest leader

Rangoon (AFP) — Min Ko Naing has emerged as the first identifiable student leader after a year of protests which he says has brought the country's single-party system to the brink of collapse.

The 26-year old chairman of the Rangoon University Union told Agence France-Presse he became an activist after being caught in a police crackdown on student demonstrators in March.

His election last Sunday to head the first student union since Ne Win banned such groups 26 years ago culminated a process begun when student protesters urged him to leave his zoology classes to fight against authoritarian rule in Burma.

Min Ko Naing, who said he was the son of simple Buddhists and had been naive about politics until a few months ago, predicted that the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) regime led by Maung Maung would eventually fall.

"We are totally united to remove the opposition...those who say we are not must be government spies," he said.

"The people are behind us and other nations are sympathetic to our cause. Victory will be ours," he said, adding that students would not allow themselves to be manipulated by any political groups.

"We would like a government that has the interests of the people at heart...a genuine people's democracy," he said.

Min Ko Naing said students hoped to eventually form a nationwide union of university, high-school and middle school students.

He said a headquarters had been opened at Rangoon General Hospital and they had received a tremendous response from students wanting to join the group.

Min Ko Naing said he was in a laboratory on March 15 when students from the Rangoon Institute of Technology arrived, shouting: "Your brothers are being killed. Are you just going to stand by and watch?"

He said he went out and began timidly distributing pamphlets. He and four friends then organised a group of students inside the campus and, despite warnings from teachers to stay, left the university.

They marched along Promenade Road until they were stopped by a barbed wire barricade and soldiers near the US ambassador's residence, he said.

The captain in charge told them not to go forward. They obeyed. But riot police who came on the scene started beating them without warning, he said.

Min Ko Naing said he tried to escape by climbing an embankment but was struck several times on the back by police. He was kicked into a ditch where a female student fell on top of him, unconscious.

He said he carried the woman to a nearby residence where he left her. He then made his way to Insein Road, which runs parallel to Promenade road, where he found students destroying state-owned buses.

He said he spontaneously climbed on top of a bus and began to preach about student resistance against the government, removing for the first time the handkerchief he had been wearing over his face to disguise his identity.

Min Ko Naing said a riot policeman emptied his revolver in his direction while he was speaking. He was chased into a small lane where a family hid him until he escaped.

At that time he made a pledge to fight to the end, the student leader said.