

Solarz: Burma could plunge into civil war

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MOST rank-and-file Burmese soldiers are sympathetic to anti-government protests, but top officers could still plunge the country into violence and civil war, diplomats and an American Congressman said yesterday.



SOLARZ, crucial week

"The future of Burma is likely to be determined in the next week," said Rep. Stephen Solarz, who met Burmese President Maung Maung and five opposition leaders during a 24-hour visit to Burma.

Speaking to reporters in Bangkok on his return from Rangoon, Solarz said the Burmese people are not isolated from the outside world.

"They have been inspired by Thailand's economic triumph" and democratic reforms in the Philippines and South Korea.

Although a special meeting of the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party may take place next Monday and approve a referendum for a multi-party system, it will be difficult for the Burmese people to accept the move, Mr Solarz said.

The government "should indeed cancel such a party congress, or else confrontations between government forces and the democracy-seeking Burmese people might take place and lead to a massive bloodbath and a civil war", he warned.

"In most parts of the country, the civilian apparatus of the government has virtually ceased to exist and most of the enlisted men in the armed forces are sympathetic to the democracy-seeking people," said Mr Solarz,

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who met opposition leaders Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Burma's founding father Aung San, Aung Gyi and former Prime Minister U Nu.

"But it is questionable if democracy will emerge peacefully or be a product of chaos and violence, though the Burmese people are calling for a rapid end to the one-party rule, and instead a multi-party democracy," he said.

Hundreds of thousands of Burmese, who the congressman said are "like the American people two centuries ago", are willing to continue their demonstrations to bring an end to the existing political system in their country.

Mr Solarz said the US would offer "moral and political support" to the protesters.

He said Congress is expected to adopt a resolution supporting a "rapid, peaceful transition to a multi-party system in Burma".

Saying the Burmese

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Solarz: Burma facing civil war

people "applaud American authorities", including himself, wherever they go in Rangoon, Mr Solarz said the US and other friendly countries should consider increasing levels of assistance programmes to Burma in the event of a peaceful transition to a democratic system.

Despite its great natural resources, Burma's economy has been stagnant for almost three decades as a result of the government's socialist policies, the congressman

said.

West Germany and Austria may offer political asylum to current Burmese leaders, Mr Solarz said.

No country should fear providing sanctuary to top Burmese leaders who may leave the country during a transition to democracy, he said.

Solarz, a Democrat from New York, is chairman of the Asian Affairs Sub-committee of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee.

He said that in discussions with former military leaders brig. Gen. Aung Gyi and Gen. Tin Oo, he received the impression that lower ranking officers and soldiers in the army were largely sympathetic to the protesters, UPI reported.

Top officers, who received the benefits of the authoritarian regime, might fight to support it and the well-disciplined soldiers might follow orders to fire on the protesters, he said.

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"Military morale has been falling every day the government shows itself unable to respond to the challenge," said a Western diplomat contacted by telephone from Bangkok.

Official Radio Rangoon reported 105 more inmates were released from a prison in Mandalay that, like at least nine other Burmese prisons, has been rocked by riots.

The radio said about 200 people looted a cannery on the outskirts of Rangoon yesterday.