

Power of Burmese army to quell revolt questioned Bp880906

By Kevin Cooney of Reuters

PARTS of the 170,000-strong Burmese army may still be willing to turn their guns on demonstrators but some military analysts doubt the army has the power or will to put down pro-democracy protests.

"They failed in August and there are many more people on the streets now," one veteran analyst of Burmese affairs said this weekend. "The numbers may be just too great for them to handle."

Soldiers shot and bayoneted demonstrators between August 8 and 12, killing thousands. Doctors say 3,000 died in Rangoon alone.

Since August 12, when the bloody 18-day rule of Sein Lwin ended, the army has stood back as

the level of protest mounted and government control of cities, towns and national services broke down.

Last Thursday hundreds of thousands of demonstrators marched in Rangoon calling for an end to the 26-year rule of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Other massive demonstrations took place in Mandalay and Monywa to the north.

A Western diplomat in Rangoon, when asked if the army could suppress the revolt now, said: "It would be quite difficult because the mass of the people are so committed

to the cause."

The government's failure to follow through on a strongly worded warning to students to vacate occupied government offices was also a sign the army might no longer be willing or able to keep the government in power, said another analyst.

General Tin Oo, a former defence minister now prominent in the movement to overthrow the BSPP, said last week that officers up to battalion-commander level supported demands for multi-party democracy. But he said some officers at the top of the command structure still backed Ne Win.

Ne Win, the former general who ruled Burma since 1962 before stepping down in July as street protests mounted, is still believed by many to be the real power in the country.

"From reports from some of my friends quite a lot of them (soldiers) are not anti-people — the majority," 81-year-old U Nu, the last democratically elected prime minister of Burma and the man Ne Win overthrew, said last week.

A hundred retired senior officers, many of whom are still widely respected in the army, signed a statement backing democracy and condemning 26 years of single-party rule.

If a large section of the army were to balk at using their guns on citizens again, there is no question in the minds of opposition leaders in Rangoon some troops would open fire.

The army has been hardened by decades of struggle against ethnic minority groups fighting for various degrees of autonomy and has a reputation of being one of the most disciplined forces in

Southeast Asia.

"It would certainly be possible for the army to re-establish control by force in Rangoon, although the result would probably be very bloody," another Western diplomat in Rangoon said. "It is less certain how successful they would be elsewhere in the country."

Soldiers were seen reinforcing their defensive positions around Rangoon ahead of the next major confrontation between government and opposition, set for this Thursday.

The opposition says a general strike will begin on Thursday and will not end until the government of President Maung Maung has fallen. Maung Maung succeeded Sein Lwin.

Hundreds of thousands are expected to take to the streets on that day to press demands for an interim government to lead the country towards a multi-party democracy.

"The main gate of the Ministry of Defence has been strengthened and trenches are being dug around military bases including the main Ministry of Defence cantonment," a third Western diplomat in Rangoon said yesterday.

He said the city hall and other government ministries were also well guarded as were the homes of the rulers in the Lake Inya district.

"Troops are still very definitely around," he said, "but there has been no obvious increase in troop numbers."

The army on Sunday night denied a report carried on the British Broadcasting Corporation that a number of battalions had changed sides outside Rangoon. Diplomats said they could not confirm the BBC report but they had heard reports of worsening morale among troops in the countryside.

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A crowd of Buddhist monks demonstrate against the government in Rangoon last week. Monks have been at the forefront of anti-government protests. — AP BP880906