

Burmese government opposition 'in secret talks'

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Rangoon (UPI, AP) — Opposition leaders and government representatives are negotiating ways to end 26 years of authoritarian rule and form an interim government to replace it, diplomats and Burmese political sources said yesterday.

More than 100,000 anti-government protesters again flooded the streets of Rangoon with increasingly strident calls for democracy.

"We are hearing that negotiations are going on between representatives of the government and the opposition figures as to the composition of an interim government," said a diplomat.

"Both sides are feeling each other out," he said.

If successful, the negotiations would bring an end to the harsh socialist, isolationist, military-backed regime that has been in power since 1962.

Strikes, demonstrations and the erosion of administrative control have brought the once-tough government to its knees.

Burmese political sources said it was believed that the government of President Maung Maung has already accepted in principle that it will have to step down to end the months of demonstrations that have paralysed the country.

A key matter being worked out, one source said, was "the safe departure out of Burma of retired party chairman U Ne Win and his close associates."

Gen Ne Win, now 77, led the 1962 coup and dominated the country until his retirement in July. The harsh, charismatic leader is believed to retain much of his influence over government and military leaders who rose to power under his patronage.

Earlier the top four opposition leaders — former prime minister U Nu, former defence minister Gen Tin Oo, retired Brig Gen. Aung Gyi, and Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero Gen Aung San — called off plans to form an interim government immediately.

"Formation of an interim government before the present government resigns would be tantamount to forming a parallel government,"

a joint statement said.

Such a parallel government would be "untimely" and an "impediment" to progress, it said. An interim government should only be formed once the ruling party has given up power, it said.

The statement urged student groups calling for the immediate formation of an opposition government to be patient.

Some student groups have threatened to name their own government if the top opposition leaders do not act soon.

Others say they will be forced to use violence if the government does not step down peacefully.

Sources told the Associated Press two student groups went to the US Embassy on Wednesday and asked for weapons. One group said it had 5,000 people ready to bear arms. An embassy official said the United States could offer only moral support, the sources said, speaking on condition of anonymity. The embassy did not comment officially on the report.

VOLUNTEERS

Some students have openly called for volunteers to undergo training in military tactics, and marchers in recent days have become more aggressive, shouting death threats against government officials.

On Wednesday, when more than 100,000 people took to the streets of Rangoon, marchers shouted "You (government officials) run or we will kill you" and "If they don't fall, make them fall."

Student protesters are reported to have approached ethnic Burmese resistance groups for arms, but there were no clear reports whether the arms had been provided.

The only face-to-face negotiations between opposition and government came on Tuesday when top opposition leaders met with the five-man government election commission, but diplomats said indirect contacts have continued.

The commission reported to government leaders that they needed the support of the people to hold peaceful elections and they did not

have it, one diplomat said.

About 75 people ended a 48-hour hunger strike yesterday morning outside City Hall, and more than 90 other people quickly began a 72-hour fast. The strikes, organised by the "National Liberation Students Union" to pressure the government into resigning, revive a tactic used decades ago in fighting British colonial rule. More than 1,000 schoolchildren completed a 36-hour fast on Monday night.

Strikes kept government offices closed down despite a government appeal to workers to return to their jobs. Many private shops were open, but they often had little for sale.

Student groups announced a full-scale general strike and massive demonstrations were planned for tomorrow.

● In Bangkok, an official of a committee supporting former leader U Nu, said two men were found prowling on the grounds of his house on Wednesday night.

"One of the men was caught by guards and confessed that they were sent by a government agency to assassinate U Nu," said Zaw Min, an official of the Committee for Restoration of Democracy in Burma.

Zaw Min said the information was relayed to the committee by Daw Mya Yi, wife of the 82-year-old former prime minister, telephoning from Rangoon.

He said he did not have details of which agency had sent the men.

U Nu could not immediately be contacted and the account could not be independently confirmed.

A Western diplomat in Rangoon said yesterday there was a report U Nu's old party, the Clean Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, had asked Aung San Suu Kyi to be its leader now that parties are legal. Her response was not immediately known.

Meanwhile, state-run Radio Rangoon said security forces fatally shot two looters. It said one person was killed late Wednesday when guards fired on about 150 people looting a rice warehouse in the city's port area. The other person was slain early yesterday when "violence makers" tried to break into a medical school near Rangoon's Danyingon golf course, it said.

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