

Burma gov't says troops no longer with BSPP

Rangoon (Reuter) — The Burmese Government announced yesterday that all 180,000 members of the armed forces and all civil servants were no longer members of the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party.

Official radio Rangoon said the Council of State, the top government body, took the decision to ensure that multi-party elections set for within three months would be free.

"Armed forces men, policemen, personnel from public organisations, personnel from state departments and corporations and other personnel who take their salary from the government ... are not party members," the broadcast quoted the government as saying.

"I'm absolutely amazed," a Western diplomat said. "It sounds like a mass suicide."

The radio also quoted a party document as saying that as a result of the Council's decision everyone employed by the state would be permitted to resign from the BSPP, Burma's only political party for the last quarter century.

The government order said soldiers, police and other civil servants should be severed from all political parties.

Earlier, an estimated half a million people took to Rangoon streets for the third consecutive day, demanding that the government resign to make way for an interim administration.

Virtually the whole Rangoon police force and nearly all civil servants in the capital have been on strike and taking part in demonstrations supporting the opposition's demands.

The government agreed to hold multi-party elections last weekend, after months of massive street protests and strikes crippled the country.

The opposition rejected the election offer, saying the BSPP was incapable

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of running a free poll and insisting that the government stand down.

The broadcast also carried a report of a third document, from the Council of Ministers, saying that since Burma was now a multi-party democracy civil servants should return to work by September 19.

It said that in multi-party democracies "government staff have the duty to support any government that was elected by public votes."

The government said it would take action against civil servants who had not returned to their jobs by September 26.

Severing the armed forces from the ruling party has been a key opposition demand and was contained in a joint statement issued by leading opposition figures General Tin Oo, Aung San Suu Kyi and Brigadier Aung Gyi, on Wednesday.

Tin Oo, a former defence minister, has said in the past that the opposition cannot hope to succeed without the support of the armed forces.

Since the founding of the BSPP in 1963 to legitimise the rule of Ne Win, who seized power the year before, all members of Burma's armed forces have had to be party members.

"I think they've lit a fuse," one Western diplomat said. "And they're not far off lighting the powder keg."

"Either they're preparing to retire gracefully, having made their last concession or it's a trick."

"It makes a very volatile situation pretty well explosive."

Tin Oo told Reuters on Thursday night it was his sense of the situation that the government was seeking a way out — "Some sort of honourable withdrawal and honourable retreat."

OA/1988/114/0012