

Burma leaders talk only to themselves

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BURMA'S leaders rarely talk to their people and never to the foreign press or the opposition.

Progress towards resolving the political conflict in the country has been hampered by the leaders' refusal to hold direct talks with opposition groups, diplomats in Bangkok and Rangoon told Reuter.

"If there's a dialogue, it's a dialogue of the deaf because only the opposition is doing the talking, mostly to the press," an Asian diplomat said.

Official Rangoon radio in a recent broadcast blasted the foreign news media for its alleged false reporting and said it was exacerbating an already delicate situation in Burma, where the main source of news is foreign radio broadcasts. The foreign media is in frequent contact with opposition figures.

The diplomat said the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party could be forced to the negotiating table if fractious opposition groups managed to form a united front for an alternate government.

The rival body would be a powerful magnet and draw in the support of people seeking an end to 26 years of militaristic socialism, which has turned Burma from a land of plenty to one of the poorest countries in the world.

The government, virtually paralysed by nearly two months of daily demonstrations, has repeatedly rejected opposition demands that it step down and is standing firm on its compromise offer to hold multi-party elections within three months.

Diplomats said the 180,000-strong army, the final arbiter of power, might be forced to reassess its backing of the BSPP if the opposition government became the focus of the people's revolution.

At a recent meeting, student leaders asked the "big four" opposition leaders — Brig Aung Gyi, 70, former prime minister U Nu, 82, former defence minister Gen Tin Oo, 62, and Aung San Suu Kyi, 43-year-old daughter of Burma's independence hero Aung San — to formulate a plan for an interim government to replace the BSPP and supervise elections.

Aung San Suu Kyi, thrown by events into the forefront of dissent, said the

by Jose Katigbak

senior leaders promised to respond to the students soon.

A Western diplomat said apart from forming a rival government, opposition leaders must try to organise a political party to counterbalance the BSPP.

"They have to learn to think ahead, to anticipate events," he said.

"You have to remember that these are people who have had no political life in a quarter of a century," another diplomat said of the opposition's difficulty in getting organised.

At a meeting with a poll body set up by the state to supervise the proposed elections, opposition leaders stuck to their demands that the government must step down before free and fair elections could be held.

The opposition said it was at a disadvantage because it had not yet formed political parties and had no financial resources to take on the experienced and rich BSPP.

The fact that state-run television clearly stated the opposition's position on its news programme on Tuesday night was seen as an optimistic sign by one diplomat.

"It seems to me that the government would not have shown it on the state-owned television unless the government side was at least prepared to contemplate some sort of compromise," he said.

One Rangoon resident said in a telephone interview that he was not so sure.

"We've been living under them for 26 years," he said. "Our government has so many tricks."

Other diplomats said the leaders' silence on the opposition's rejection of their election plan was ominous.

"It could be the guys on top are just giving opposition leaders more rope to hang themselves with, waiting for an excuse to crack a few heads," an Asian diplomat said.

Another saw the silence as a deliberate ploy by the leaders to weather the storm by delay because they feel time is on their side.

"It's a war of nerves. Each side is waiting for the other to blink."

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