

Japan can play key role in Burma

BP880919

THE early 1950s prosperous Burma was helping out devastated Japan by exporting large quantities of rice to it.

Rangoon was regarded as a more promising city than Singapore.

For a long time Burma was one of Asia's richest countries, blessed with a soil and climate that could produce abundant rice harvests almost on their own, with good oil and gas reserves, magnificent teak forests and fine supplies of gemstones.

Its people were well educated; with an 80 per cent literacy rate and good universities, they astonishingly still are.

But today Burma is a wrecked place: one of the world's ten poorest countries, a rice importer, isolated and, for the past two months, veering between army repression and anarchy.

The difference between Japan and Burma since the early 1950s is the difference between good government and bad — or, in Burma's case, appalling.

From 1962 until this summer, Burma was ruled by General Ne Win, who probably still calls the shots in private.

His "Burmese way to socialism" was officially described as a combination of Buddhism, Marxism, isolationism and militarism.

The dictatorship behind it tried to regulate Burmese life in the most minute respects: from control of local organisations to nationalisation of the bakeries. Burma under General Ne Win was, as the regime claimed, non-aligned.

It was also one of the world's most impoverishing and unsuccessful experiments in totalitarian socialism.

This is why the riots that have erupted almost every day since mid-July are so encouraging.

The Burmese are demanding multi-party democracy — now.

CONCEDE

The government seemed to concede the principle on September 10, when it announced the legalisation of opposition parties and an election within three months.

That will not satisfy the demonstrators, who want an interim government to keep the election clean, and an earlier polling date.

The move to democracy and a freer economy will not happen smoothly. It is remarkable that it is happening at all.

Other recent shifts to democracy took place in loser dictatorships (the Philippines) or richer ones (South Korea and Taiwan).

Burma's revolution, if

it succeeds, will have come in what might as well have been a communist country. It is a high tide indeed that reaches such a nook.

Whichever way Burma now goes, it is unlikely to remain the irrelevant place it has been for the past quarter-century.

The heavyweights — both superpowers, and China and India — have been content to leave Burma to its weird self so long as no rival took an interest in it.

As in the case of Afghanistan, geography and history both argue against that kind of disinterest persisting for long.

Burma abuts India and China, Laos (the limit of Vietnam's Indochinese empire) and Thailand. Britain and Japan fought fiercely over Burma in the Second World War. Might someone again?

Either superpower would give much for Burma's great military asset: its Indian Ocean coastline.

REPLACE

A naval and air base there could not replace either America's Philippine bases or Russia's bases in Vietnam (East Asia and the Pacific would lie beyond a Burmese stationing).

But it would make a dream of both superpowers come true — a settled Indian Ocean base, instead of the makeshift arrangements each now has.

The real contestants over Burma, however, are likely to be the neighbourhood powers, India and China.

The Indian subcontinent, to Burma's west, and the land route into China, to Burma's north-east, were the Burmese prizes that kept Britain and Japan fighting there 45 years ago.

Today China and India can fight their own battles. In Burma, unfortunately, they may.

For now, the West's interest lies in seeing that the Rangoon rioters get what they want: the kind of society and economy that pluralists believe in.

The country best placed to do that is neither the old colonial power, Britain, nor the Western world's leader, America. It is Japan.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia the Japanese are hated for the Second World War; in Burma they are remembered for giving kick to the colonial masters.

Today Japan supplies almost two-thirds of Burma's foreign aid.

If Japan has a new international political role to try out, Burma is the place to start. — *The Economist-Post service*

CP/1988/10/10001