

A critical day today for Burma

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RANGOON — Burma faced a critical day today, with student leaders calling for the biggest-ever general strike after three weeks of demonstrations and veteran politicians calling for unity and peace.

The student leaders, who have led much of the protest against the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), said the strike would begin with mass rallies in Rangoon.

The demonstrators want to see quick elections preceded by an acceptable interim government. The government, now headed by President Maung Maung, has offered a referendum if the party approves it at an emergency congress on September 12.

On Monday a group of 21 opposition politicians founded the league for democracy and peace. Their leader, former prime minister U Nu, plans to

announce whether he would be willing to head an interim government.

The league is keen to unify the opposition and bring peace to the streets.

The BSPP has ruled Burma under a one-party system since a coup in 1962. Its leader of 26 years, Ne Win, was forced by mass protests to resign in July followed by hardliner Sein Lwin, his successor who lasted only 18 days.

Troops went on an orgy of killing from August 8 to 12 during which thousands of people died, according to diplomats. But the demonstrations increased in intensity.

Diplomats said the BSPP might not yet be defeated. Rumours swept the capital on Tuesday and yesterday of everything from a military coup to a harsh clampdown on demonstrations.

As darkness fell no major military activity was visible in Rangoon yesterday, although there appeared to be a slightly higher than normal number of troop-carriers and fuel-tankers moving between bases. — Reuter

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