

Victory for people's power?

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RANGOON — The Burmese people have won their peaceful battle for a multi-party democracy waged against the one-party socialist government, but party leaders are expected to drag their feet in making the changes, diplomats said yesterday.

"It's not a stalemate — the people have won," said a Western diplomat.

"This government has practically no base and it's clear that if they try on their commitment on Sept 12 there will be a real explosion," he said.

An extraordinary Congress of the ruling Burmese Socialist Programme Party is scheduled for Sept 12 to decide on allowing a referendum so the people can choose between the present one-party system or a multi-party democracy.

Analysts expect the party to succeed in gathering a quorum for the Sept 12 meeting, resorting to the use of military planes to bring some party members to Rangoon.

Radio Rangoon last evening announced the release of another 486 prisoners in Mandalay, describing 330 as "convicts."

US Congressman Stephen J. Solarz, Chairman of the Asian Affairs Sub-Committee of the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee arrived in Rangoon yesterday for a 24-hour visit.

He is expected to meet with opposition leaders and explore ways the United States could help the Burmese people to achieve the democratic ideals they seek.

Western diplomatic sources estimate that more than 1,000 unarmed civilians in Rangoon alone were slaughtered when army troops suppressed massive demonstrations that began Aug 8.

About 30,000 students and other anti-government protesters yesterday continued weeks of peaceful demonstrations, ignoring a speech by President Maung Maung broadcast Thursday nationwide and frequently repeated by official media since.

"Students rejected his plea for cooperation," a diplomat said. "They repeated their demands for an immediate change to a caretaker government that would implement some sort of multi-party democratic system."

"They say the people have spoken and there is no need for this process," he said.

Maung Maung and politburo members have pledged to ask the party's central

committee to accept a referendum.

They have all promised to resign if the proposal is not accepted and forwarded to the people's assembly for approval and execution in a meeting scheduled for Sept 13.

"Older Burmese and members of the middle class are inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt," a diplomat said. "The majority of the people, however, don't believe anything the government says."

Demonstrations to maintain pressure on the government to admit its defeat were yesterday staged in front of the US Embassy, at Rangoon General Hospital, and in northeastern Rangoon.

"The government is completely powerless but hasn't made the final concession — giving up," a senior Western diplomat said.

"In the meantime, when there are demonstrations they are big, peaceful, there is no security presence, and the country has come to a halt in every respect — after awhile it will start to bust," he said.

"The people still have the carnival spirit in mind, but when the country is bust, when there is no more fuel, and when food distribution fails because of it — then there will be more trouble."

Diplomats estimate that at least 40 Burmese cities nationwide are being administered by local residents and Buddhist monks.

Opposition leaders yesterday prepared for massive demonstrations, rallies, and marches called for Sept 8, which they hope will be the largest in the nation's history.

"These things take considerable organization and planning and that may have been a factor in the timing," said one diplomat, explaining why opposition leaders chose to wait six days.

"The question is whether the people involved in the protests feel strongly enough, or will be able to generate enough activity and force to actually bring the government down before Sept 12," he said.

"The government has at least a fighting chance to carry out its timetable."

Diplomats said there was "considerable discussion" within the military on what its role in the present situation should be.

"There are no visible signs they are leaning towards one course of action or another but they are clearly adhering to the

policy they laid down after the last president stepped down — to maintain a presence but not interfere with the demonstrations," a Western diplomat said.

Food and gasoline prices in Rangoon remained high but food continued to flow into the capital, mainly by ship via the Rangoon River.

"There is food available and people can get what they need," said one Rangoon resident. "Most of the markets are open and have food in them."

Striking employees from the Petrochemicals Corporation and Petroleum Supply Corporation also took part in yesterday's demonstrations.

Although some buses and taxis continued to operate, many Rangoon residents have begun restricting their travel to conserve on limited supplies of gasoline.

Stations selling gasoline have been closed for about six days. The country's oil refineries are also closed.

"The real question is whether the military will be patient if the protesters bring the pot to a boil — that is the unknown quantity," said a Western diplomat.

Several diplomats said there were reports that Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of a famous Burmese pilot, a leading opposition figure, and frequently referred to as "Burma's Corazon Aquino," was surrounded by communist advisors who were manipulating her.

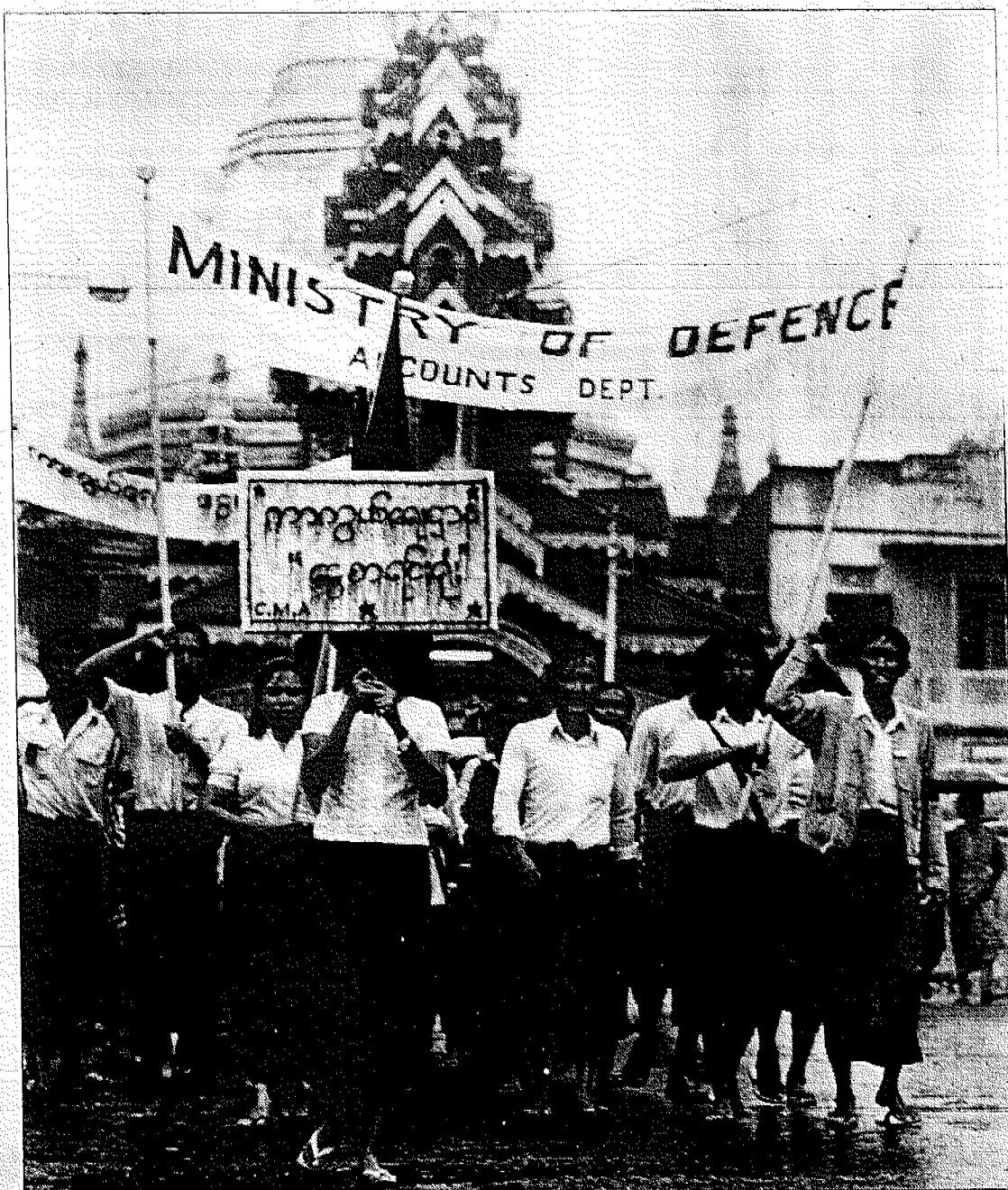
"There is another theory that she is being manipulated by the British Embassy and don't believe either of them are true," said a senior Western diplomat.

Suu Kyi is married to a British professor and lives in England but was visiting her ailing mother in Rangoon when the present wave of demonstrations began to rock the country.

Diplomats said the charges emerged from peoples' false perception of her demands for instant democracy and instant multi-party general elections which were attracting those who would benefit most from great political instability.

"There are a lot of whispering campaigns being put out by everybody against everybody else here at the moment, but the one about Aung San Suu Kyi is of long standing and perhaps have even more validity than most of the others," a diplomat said. — UPI

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REUTER PHOTO
AYE THANT

SOAKED by monsoon rains staff from Burma's Ministry of Defence join street protests in Rangoon on Thursday to call for the overthrow of the Burmese government. All sectors of society except uniformed soldiers have joined the protests.