

THE STANDOFF CONTINUES

By
JAMES W. HATTON

TN 880916

IN LATE July, Burma's ruling party began the changing of the guard with predictable toughness: rejecting outgoing chairman Ne Win's call for a vote on democracy, naming former Gen Sein Lwin his successor, arresting its critics and imposing martial law.

But for the first time in 26 years, tough tactics did not work. Most government and many other employees went on strike. Transportation ground to a halt. Food and other shortages worsened. Thousands of people took to the streets in almost daily demonstrations even though troops fired on unarmed crowds, killing at least 112 people.

Since then, the authoritarian government has begun making what has become a string of concessions. But they still have not silenced the nationwide call for democracy.

First, hardliner Sein Lwin, widely hated for orchestrating the brutal repression of earlier demonstrations, resigned Aug 12, after only 17 days in power.

The party then turned to one of only two civilians in the top rungs of government. On Aug 12, Western-educated lawyer Maung Maung became president.

Burma now had a civilian leader for the first time in 26 years, and a relative moderate when compared with Sein Lwin. But the

transition government.

A day later the trio met with the newly named elections commission and explained why they continued to push for an interim administration.

They said if the general election was held in three months or less as the government planned, they could not possibly organize political parties and financing in time to contest it.

Also, they noted the Burma Socialist Programme Party has been entrenched for 26 years. It has 1.1 million members, including members of the military, out of a population of 38 million.

They said they did not trust the current government to run an honest election, and that an interim administration was needed to ensure the polling would be free and fair.

The opposition leaders have not specified who they want in a transition government, merely that they should be "acceptable to all the people." They also have not said if they would be willing to serve.

But they apparently want some kind of coalition government that would include members of the opposition. It would run the country while the opposition leaders organize political parties, and it would give them enough power to ensure a chance at the polls.

Maung Maung's government has flatly rejected the demand and is proceeding with plans for an early general election.

demonstrations continued, sometimes drawing as many as 1 million people into the streets of Rangoon, the capital.

On Aug 24, Maung Maung lifted martial law and curfews in Rangoon and elsewhere, and announced a special party congress would be held Sept 12 to consider a referendum on multiparty elections.

The next day, the government released the 10 political prisoners arrested July 29, including Burma's leading dissident, Aung Gyi. It also began releasing most of the 1,500 people arrested during street protests.

Still the demonstrations continued, with the protesters now calling for an interim government to lead Burma back to democracy. On Sept 9, former Prime Minister Nu announced formation of a rival government and called for general elections a month later.

The next day, the Burma Socialist Programme Party declared an end to its monopoly on power and called for multiparty elections. A day later, Parliament approved holding the elections, named a commission of elders to oversee them and authorized amending the constitution to permit multiparty rule. It set a target date of three months for the elections but said they could be earlier or later.

Still the streets were filled with increasingly angry demonstrators. And on Sept 12, opposition leaders Aung Gyi, Tin Oo and Aung San Suu Kyi issued their first joint statement — a letter to Maung Maung demanding a

The standoff continues.

The opposition has increased its pressure, filling the streets of Rangoon with thousands of people daily and reviving an old tactic — hunger strikes — used decades ago in the agitation against British colonial rule.

Student-led demonstrators have become more militant recently, marching in a more aggressive manner and shouting strident slogans against the government rather than merely demanding democracy. Some groups reportedly have been seeking weapons.

Opposition leaders have urged restraint, but have accused the government of using delaying tactics in hopes the opposition will fade as foodstocks shrivel and hunger replaces zeal.

Most observers believe the Burmese army will be the final arbiter. Tough and disciplined, only a few of the 186,000 soldiers so far have joined the fight against the military-backed government.

"It's the only really organized force in the country. Whoever gains its loyalty controls the state," Burma specialist Josef Silverstein recently told *The Associated Press*. "I think the army is still 100 per cent behind Ne Win and Maung Maung."

But Rangoon diplomats say Tin Oo and Aung Gyi, both widely respected former generals who broke with Ne Win, could win the military to their side. They also do not rule out a coup by disillusioned young leaders in army combat commands. — AP

02/10/88/34/0012