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Saw Maung kills scores to maintain order

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RANGOON — The government of coup leader Gen Saw Maung said troops trying to maintain order have killed scores of civilians in recent days amid a harsh crackdown on pro-democracy protests.

Pro-democracy demonstrators stayed off the streets yesterday for a second straight day following the crackdown.

Meanwhile, Saw Maung was named prime minister after the coup in which he ousted President Maung Maung, Burma's first civilian leader after 26 years of authoritarian rule.

Saw Maung, who holds the defence and foreign affairs portfolios, was selected prime minister by the nine-member governing council named Tuesday, state radio reported. Most of the council members are Saw Maung's military colleagues and helped in Sunday's coup.

He became the nation's fourth leader in the past two months of chaos triggered by widespread demonstrations against one-party rule.

Troops killed 67 people, wounded 34 and arrested 100 "in course of the government's law and order restoration work" in Rangoon and three other areas Tuesday and yesterday, government spokesman Kyaw San said.

Kyaw San said he had no knowledge of a rumoured sweep by authorities against student leaders who spearheaded the pro-democracy protest.

The official death toll since the coup has risen to 144, although some Western diplomats believe at least 400 people have been killed in Rangoon alone,

many when troops opened fire on largely unarmed protesters Monday.

One diplomat, speaking on condition of not being identified, said army trucks loaded with bodies were seen after the height of the shooting.

"At Rangoon General Hospital, there were 200 corpses on Monday night, and that was only one hospital," he said.

Pro-democracy demonstrators who have filled the capital by the hundreds of thousands in recent weeks stayed off the streets Tuesday and yesterday, residents reported.

Saw Maung, 59, is known as a loyal follower of Ne Win, who seized power in 1962 and instituted a repressive, military-backed system that turned resource-rich Burma into one of the world's poorest nations.

After Ne Win resigned in late July, the government was headed for 17 days by former military officer Sein Lwin, who dissidents blame for previous harsh suppression of protests. His selection prompted widespread protests and strikes that led to his resignation Aug 12.

Maung Maung became the first civilian leader in 26 years on Aug 19, but the protests continued. He promised multi-party elections, but opposition figures demanded an interim government to oversee the balloting.

After ousting Maung Maung on Sunday, Saw Maung also promised multi-party elections, but did not set a date. All three successors to Ne Win reportedly are loyal to the former leader.

Some observers believe Ne Win remains a powerful force in Burma and are sceptical about the promise of elections. — AP

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