A QUARTER OF A CENTURY OF STRUGGLE

Background

A few months after Burma attained independence from British colonial rule, civil war broke out in the country. As the civil war dragged on, it was the broad masses of the people who suffered most. However, despite the civil war, political evolution and economic development began to gain some initial momentum. As the people and politicians began to realize the evil consequences of civil war, the desire to end the civil war developed gradually. The movement for internal peace led by patriotic scholar Thakhin Ko Daw Hmine won the support of the broad masses.

The second military coup staged by Gen. Ne Win and his followers in 1962 to oust the popularly elected government of U Nu destroyed every step of progress that had been gained. The process of development in politics and economy decelerated at first and then come to an abrupt standstill. Finally it gradually degenerated until the country plunged to "least developed country status" in December 1987.

During these years the people of Burma ceaselessly tried to resist the military rule. The military leaders ruthlessly crushed every resistance movement, always by overacting in a very brutal way.

The first massacre (1962)

The first remarkable resistance took place in July 1962, a mere four months after the coup. On the 7th of July, just three days after the Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was formed, the students of Rangoon University, under the leadership of the Rangoon University Students' Union (RUSU) chaired by the late Ko Ba Swe Lay, performed a peaceful demonstration inside the Rangoon University Campus. Ne Win and his close associates sent troops equipped with newly imported G-3 automatic rifles with orders to fire into the crowds of thousands of students who were peacefully demonstrating. Over one hundred students were killed and many hundreds injured. The next morning Ne Win ordered the destruction of the RUSU building which was an invaluable historical monument. The building was blasted to pieces by heavy explosives, and every trace of it removed.

Photo 1 Remembering 8-8-88

The second massacre (1967)

The second mass killing took place in 1967 when the military junta incited a communal riot between the Chinese and Burmese. At that time shortages in rice and other basic food items forced the people of Rangoon to travel to surrounding areas in search of rice or other suitable substitutes. Nearly all the offices and industries were deserted as if a general strike had been called. Ne Win and his inner circle of trusted friends decided to divert the people's anger at being hungry by inciting the communal riots. They sent well-trained instigators to confront the Chinese students and civilians, and to agitate anti-Chinese sentiments among the Burmese and other races. The communal riots began on June 22, 1967. Ne Win's ever ready army stayed away as the riot developed into indiscriminate killings, looting and burnings. After several days, some vigilant people, including student members of the underground students' unions, distributed statements explaining to the people that the people were unknowingly dancing to the tune of Ne Win. The statement urged the people and the students to turn their direction of anger towards the military rulers. As soon as these statements appeared, a mass of about 10,000 people On June 27, gathered in Rangoon to protest against the military rulers. Within a few hours martial law had been declared and Ne Win ordered his troops to move in. They quickly rounded up 1,300 Chinese and more than 2,000 Burmese students and civilians.

The massacre in Arakan (1967)

A month later trouble broke out in Akyab, the largest city of the Arakan State. This trouble , also due to the

shortage of rice. In the afternoon of August 13, 1967, troops fired into a crowd of about 5,000 Arakanese people who were demonstrating near Sat Roe Kya Chaung, a creek to the north of Akyab. Over 100 men, women and children were killed and hundreds injured.

Students' uprising (1969)

The military junta held a students' festival in Rangoon during December, 1969. On December 1, a dispute occurred between the students and the authorities over the selling of sports tickets. In a short time the dispute was transformed into an anti-regime mass protest. Thousands of students participated in the demonstrations in Rangoon and Mandalay. When the authorities used force to quell the demonstrations, it turned into riots. Nearly 300 student leaders were arrested and most of them were expelled from their respective universities. Universities and schools were closed.

Golden Jubilee (1970)

A celebration to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first anti-colonial strike that occurred in November 1920 was organized in November 1970. During the festival, student unrest broke out. Students from Rangoon, Mandalay, Moulmein and Magwe were involved. The universities were closed and hundreds of students were arrested and expelled from the universities.

Labor Strike (1974)

The Ne Win regime promulgated a new constitution on January 1, 1974. Elections in conformity to the new constitution were held in February. The first parliament since the coup in 1962 was convened in the first week of March and power was transferred from the military leaders to the "newly elected civilians". Thus General Ne Win, chairman of the revolutionary council, transferred his power to the "elected civilian U Ne Win", who was elected as the chairman of the newly formed Council of State. So also General San Yu was transformed into U San Yu, Colonel Thaung Kyi to U Thaung Kyi, etc.

Apart from these changes, there was no sign of change in the ever worsening living conditions of the people. Instead, commodity prices soared up beyond the reach of low level employees. This hopeless situation resulted in a worker's uprising just a few months after the new administration was installed.

Workers from the Chauk Oil Fields began their strike on the 13th of May, 1974, demanding higher wages. The strike quickly spread to other towns as far away as the city of Rangoon. On June 6 and 7, the authorities responded by firing automatic rifles into the crowds of demonstrators. All the factories were stormed. The authorities' announcement said 22 workers were killed and eighty wounded, but sources close to the workers gave the number of killed over 100. As the students tried to join the workers, all the universities and schools were closed. Thousands of workers were jailed.

U Thant's Funeral (1974)

U Thant, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, died in New York on November 25, 1974. His body was brought to Rangoon and after a disagreement between the students and the authorities over the burial site, the students took the body away to the University Campus. U Thant's body was put in a mausoleum built by the students on the plot of ground where the famous Rangoon University Students' Union Building had proudly stood.

Ne Win ordered his troops to storm the campus at mid-night on December 11, resulting in heavy casualties among the protesters. All the people found in the campus were arrested without any investigation. Nearly 4,000 were jailed. Universities and schools were closed once again.

Students and workers join hands (1975)

On June 6, 1975, hundreds of students gathered in the Rangoon University Campus. Another group, who converged on the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, were arrested early in the morning. In the campus the demonstrations continued and, on June 11, students marched to Insein Prison where thousands of students and workers were being held. Several hundred workers joined the students. The demonstrators were rounded up by the army and hundreds of students and workers were imprisoned as universities and schools were closed.

Centenary of Thakhin Ko Daw Hmine (1976)

Students demonstrated again on March 23, 1976 to mark the centenary of the birth of the late patriotic leader and scholar Thakhin Ko Daw Hmine. Before the demonstrations gained momentum and spread, the authorities closed the universities. Rangoon, Bassein and Moulmein were involved. Hundreds of students were arrested, among them Slai Tin Maung Oo who calmly pronounced his last words, before he bravely climbed the steps to be hanged by the military authorities on sedition charges.

The third demonetization

The Ne Win regime unscrupulously demonetized the existing currency three times. The first was in 1964 when 50, and 100 kyat notes were canceled; the second was in 1985 when newly distributed 100 kyat notes were involved. In both of those cancellations, the value of the demonetized notes was compensated although with a certain amount of reduction. The third demonetization was declared on September 5, 1987, and was carried out without compensation. The third attempt shocked everybody young and old because a mere two months ago the authorities issued a statement warning the people not to believe the rumors that some of the currencies would be demonetized soon. The announcement even promised that the administration would not cancel any currency notes.

The students of the Rangoon Institute of Technology led the protests and the general public supported

them. The authorities hurriedly closed the schools and universities.

Apart from these uprisings, there have been many other forms of resistance against military rule.

In 1976 a certain number of young patriotic army officers led by Captain Ohn Kyaw Myint planned a plot against their military commanders. But the news was prematurely leaked and the young patriots were put on trial. Ohn Kyaw Myint was hanged and others were given jail terms.

Another coup attempt occurred at the end of 1977. It was also discovered prematurely and three of the coup leaders, Manh Ngwe Aung, Manh Dah Weit and Ko Kyaw Htoo, and their followers were put on trial and given death sentence, for the leaders, and lesser sentences for the followers. One of the coup leaders, U Kyaw Hla, escaped to the KNU held area.

Split among the military leaders

There have been a lot of differences among the military leaders. Out of 17 Revolutionary Council members formed in 1962, only two, Ne Win himself and San Yu, were still in power when Ne Win declared his retirement in 1988. Some had been sacked, some forced to resign or retire, and some became freedom fighters.

From 1962 to this day, Ne Win remains the only most powerful dictator in the country while others play as part time performers who appear and disappear in a cycle of 'come and go'.

The National Democratic Front (NDF)

Some ethnic organizations have been struggling against the military since independence in 1948. Eleven of these ethnic organizations grouped together and formed the National Democratic Front (NDF). The NDF has been the main opposition front which can confront the military rulers since the coup in 1962.

8-8-88

- March

With the accumulation of every kind of discontent among all the people, the situation was rife for an explosion. Any spark, from wherever, would be enough to ignite the explosion.

On March 12, 1988, a quarrel between a group of students of the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) and a group of local youths was mishandled by the authorities. The anti-riot armed police, called Lon Htein, specially trained under the direct instruction of notorious Sein Lwin, intervened and fired with automatic rifles at the students. Maung Phone Maw and Maung Soe Naing, both RIT students, were killed. As the news circulate to the other universities, anger among the students deepened. The Lon Htein raided the RIT on the 14th of March. Several hundreds of students were beaten. Some were sent off to Insein prison. On the 15th of March, the Lon Htein attacked 3,000 students gathering on Prome Road. Many students were beaten to death, some drowned in Inya Lake, many female students were robbed and molested. The small white bridge at the site of the riot turned red with the blood of the fallen youth.

The students demonstrated again on March 18 along Sule Pagoda Road in the center of Rangoon. The Lon Htein again over-reacted. An eleven year old student, on his way home from school, came across the demonstrations and so he joined in. When the Lon Htein attacked, the young boy was repeatedly beaten even after he had fallen to the ground. Onlookers yelled and attacked the Lon Hteins.

A riot followed which spread to all parts of Rangoon. More than 100 people, mostly young students, were killed. In a single police van, 41 young students, including some girls, died from suffocation. At first the authorities denied this news but confessed to it later.

- June

Another massacre occurred on June 21 when teenagers were run down by a military truck. The local people again attacked the Lon Htein in retaliation. In the afternoon, the troops intervened and fired at everybody who happened to be on the road.

- August

Ne Win, San Yu and some top BSPP leaders resigned on June 23 and the notorious Sein Lwin, who was better known as a butcher, took over both jobs of the two outgoing men. Meanwhile, the students called for a general strike on 8.8.88.

On the declared day, more people than expected turned up to participate in the demonstrations. About 200,000 took part on that day. Most of the demonstrators had their faces masked so that the military count not identify them. No remarkable incident occurred that day.

That night, tens of thousands of people gathered in front of the City Hall. One after another they delivered speeches criticizing the regime and demanding the release of prisoners, the setting up of multi-party elections, etc.

At about midnight the troops fired into the masses killing hundreds of people on the spot.

The next day the people resumed the demonstration. There were more killings, more demonstrations.....

On the 10th of August the people blocked all roads by cutting down trees or placing whatever they could find in the roads to prevent the military from moving around the city. The troops stationed in different parts of the city were isolated; some without sufficient rations or even water.

Some troops surrendered to the people while some sneaked out under the cover of darkness. The military leaders were terrified. The seriousness of the situation forced the leadership to persuade Sein Lwin to resign. They did not even have time to decide who should succeed Sein Lwin. Sein Lwin resigned on 12 August. Appointment of Dr Maung Maung was declared only on the 19th of August.

The situation became more and more confused. More than one hundred organizations among the people emerged. A General Strike Committee was formed but was not too strong. Some leading figures also emerged during the uprising viz. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, U Tin Oo, U Nu, U Aung Gyi, Min Ko Naing, Daw Myint Myint Khin, Moe Thee Zun, etc.

• September

On September 17, all the individuals and organizations reach an agreement that an interim government should be formed and declared not later than September 20. On the 18th, one day after a compromise was reached, Ne Win ordered Saw Maung to declared a so-called coup. Troops opened fire indiscriminately, killing hundreds.

Thousands of students and civilians fled to the NDF held areas. ABSDF was born in late 1988, and the DAB formed shortly thereafter. A new era of struggle began.

Meanwhile, Saw Maung formed the SLORC; political parties registered; elections were held, but transfer of power to the newly elected government was canceled.

The 8-8-88 uprising exposed the true situation of Burma to the whole world. It brought to light how the military dictators have ruled the people with terror for two and a half decades, how human rights have been violated and how the people have suffered and struggled for so long.

International involvement

More and more politicians and governments of the world are beginning to clearly see the plight of the Burmese people. The United Nations Human Rights Commission has condemned the junta for its human rights violations, the European Community has decided to take action against the junta and the U.S. government has decided to place economic sanctions against them as well. These are actions which give hope and encouragement to the democratic movement in Burma.

However, more needs to be done. The legal right of the SLORC to sit in the United Nations needs to be debated. They have no mandate by the people of Burma to sit there as that mandate was given to the NLD through the May 1990 elections. Pressure by international friends must also be brought against China, Thailand, Singapore, and other countries which are trading in arms with the military, or making other significant investments in Burma. Their continued support of the SLORC is an obstacle to peace, both internally and regionally.

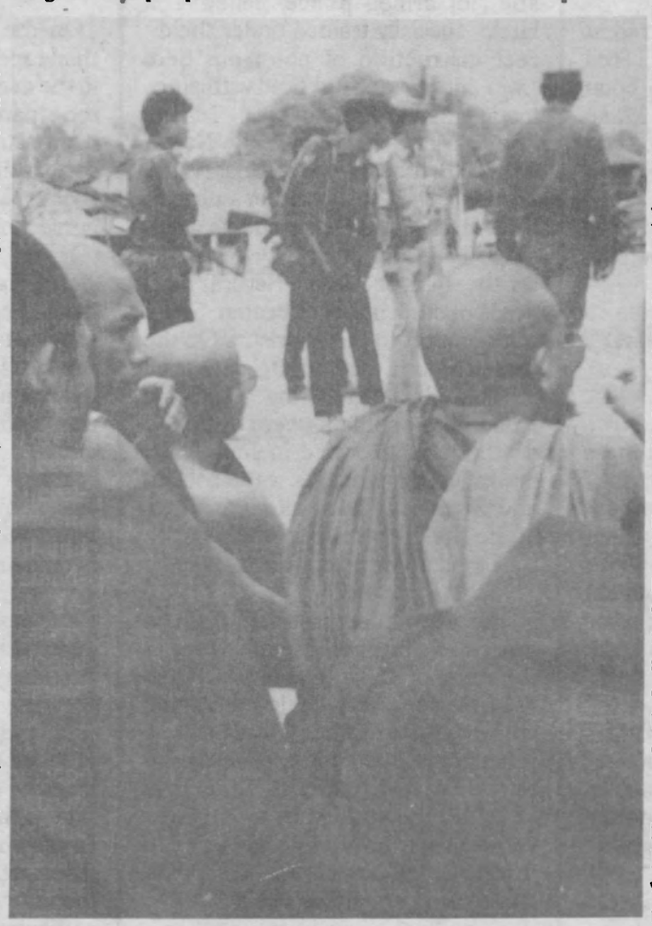

Photo 2 Peaceful monks facing heavily armed soldiers

But along with progress made, there have also been obstacles. The ASEAN nations have refused to use the pressure that they have to help push for a quicker end to the civil war and they have criticized the positive actions taken by the US, EC, Australia etc. The ASEAN nations say that the process of democratization and the guarantee of human rights must move very slowly, especially in Asia. This is obviously said by those who do not have to suffer the daily indignities of being illegally and brutally ruled by a military junta.

The people of Burma have sacrificed much during the past 43 years. During the past four years, there have been hopes that the war would be brought to an end through peaceful means, but each hope was shattered when SLORC guaranteed its own survival and power base through political, economic and military agreements with its neighbors.

The burden of seeking peaceful solutions to the civil war in Burma does not lie only with the people of Burma. Friends in every country must take responsibility for the roots of oppression which originate in their own country. This is especially true for friends in the ASEAN countries.

A quarter century of struggle for human rights and peace in Burma will end when all those who care truly work together on the issues for which they have responsibility. Regional peace and regional stability depend on this.