

BURMA

Trying to Get Together

In the Rangoon home of a high-ranking officer of the Burmese military, the telephone rings. He answers, and finds himself listening to the mother of his prospective son-in-law. She tells him the wedding is off. "I can't have my son marry a murderer's daughter," she says bluntly. In another military household, the colonel's wife has not spoken to her husband for a month. And in yet another, an official of the election commission is involved in a heated argument with his niece: "We would welcome support from any foreign power just to get rid of these barbarians," says the young woman. Responds her uncle: "You are longing for a step-father to slap you in the face." "A step-father who slaps," she says defiantly, "is more welcome than the father who is killing us."

Those divisions within élite families in Burma, all of which boiled up in recent weeks, are as profound an indicator as any of how deeply fractured Burmese society has become. As the military régime of Gen. Saw Maung presses ahead with its still-vague plans for an election, the fissures are being reflected in the political scene. Sources say the National Unity Party, loyal to behind-the-scenes strongman Ne Win, has continued to seek out opposition groupings which will affiliate with it. The objective: greater credibility amid the near-total public aversion to the ruling group. The NUP is offering up to 500,000 kyats (\$80,000), plus election expenses later, to parties that will submit to its control.

By mid-week, some 78 political organisations had registered with the election commission. For oppositionists, however, electioneering is not easy. "There have been arrests, manhandling and even refusal to permit the erection of party signs," notes one observer in Rangoon. Government employees have had to sign pledges not to join any political party. The régime has also banned any political activities "intended to bring about the disintegration of the armed forces." Oppositionists were making attempts at cobbling together a united front against the NUP, however. On Oct. 19, the newly-revived Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) tried to convene a conference of registered organisations. Only seventeen of the 28 then existing turned up. Prominent among absentees was the National League for Democracy (NLD), the political vehicle of key dissidents Aung Gyi, Tin U and Aung



Leon Schadeberg

Defecting porters in Karen territory: "They should be thankful"

San Suu Kyi. The three were taking turns touring the Burmese hinterland, stumping for support.

The NLD had more success in organising another unity conference last week. In a joint statement on Oct. 28, 43 of 48 registered groups voiced support for the more than 3,000 students who had fled to the border redoubts of insurgent groups since Saw Maung's takeover Sept. 18. The government had announced a Nov. 18 deadline for the students to return, through any of 27 "receiving centres" opened on Oct. 14.

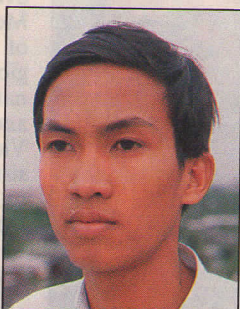
Those who had not come back by the deadline, declared the government, would be considered insurgents. By last week, according to official figures, some 500 students had returned. The 43 groups called on the government to lift the deadline, but the demand was rejected. Government spokesmen insisted that returning students would be received "without malice." However, reports surfaced of maltreatment in the receiving centres.

In Bangkok, a key Burmese student leader estimated that fewer than 2,000 students were still in the southeastern border regions. Maung Maung Kyaw, who claims to represent militant students dispersed along the Thai-Burmese frontier, reckoned another 1,000 had returned to Rangoon. "We keep students in remote camps along the Thai-Burma border," he told Asia-week, "but they don't like [being with] the rebels." Only about 400 students and other civilians had joined the Karen National Union insurgents, he said. "The Karen forces are not giving us weapons because they don't trust us," he said. "They say the

students can disrupt them. But the students are training under the KNU." There were, he believed, up to 50 government spies among the border-based students. He added: "Our armed struggle cannot get going quickly. We haven't enough money, food, medicine and other requirements. Many students in the jungle have malaria."

A college-mate of Min Ko Naing, Rangoon-based leader of the All Burma Federation of Students' Unions (ABFSU), Maung Maung Kyaw heads the Burma National Liberation Party with a claimed membership of 3,000. "Min Ko Naing is the leader inside Burma," explained Maung Maung Kyaw, who says he is still an ABFSU central committee member. "I am the exiled leader. We are friends separated for the revolution. Some time, we'll come back together again." In Bangkok, Maung Maung Kyaw was getting some assistance from retired Maj.-Gen. Sudsai Hasdin, a former Thai intelligence officer known for his involvement with the violent, ultra-rightist Red Gaur movement of vocational students in the 1970s. Sudsai said he was operating in a private capacity and had provided only humanitarian aid to the Burmese students. Maung Maung Kyaw was later arrested by Thai authorities and sent back to the border.

Also showing up in the Karens' frontier area were men who had defected from duty as dragooned "porters" for the Burmese Army. They told reporters they had been arrested in Rangoon, threatened with execution if they tried to escape, and forced to carry supplies in dangerous insurgent areas. Back in Rangoon, an army captain defended the much-criticised program this way: "We feed them a meal and give them a daily wage of 8 kyats. They should be thankful for the employment." ■



Dominic Faulder

Maung Maung Kyaw

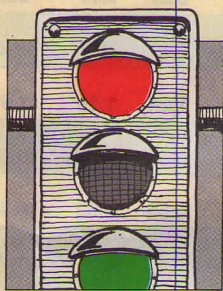
LETTERS

Asia Majorette?

To the editors of *Asiaweek*

Re your October 21 issue: Thank you for confirming the rise of the Asia-Pacific region and for reincarnating your readers — including this mildly superannuating *xifangren* [Westerner] — with your report on the splendid Teo Ser Lee, Miss Singapore World 1988. Hello Miss Teo; hello Miss World 1988.

PHILIP V. RIGGIO
Palm Beach, Florida, U.S.A.

Follow that Bee!

I agree with Jeannie Lee that corruption in the Philippines is a social epidemic [LETTERS, October 21]. The worst part of it is that some educated people

are corrupt too. Obviously our government has not yet discovered the treatment.

No matter how sincere President Aquino is, all the corrupt persons in her government can be swept out only if there is total discipline, not simply in government but in society as a whole. We have all the necessary laws and policies. But corruption in our country is like a gene passing from one generation to the next. Getting rid of it will take a thousand years. We must start from each end — with individual members of families, and with the head of our society, the president. But we will never succeed if there is an absence of personal discipline.

We should learn from that well-disciplined creature the honeybee, which does not corrupt its society but sacrifices for it.

PATRICIO A. ANANAYO
La Trinidad, Benguet, Philippines

Timber: Hard Choices

In "Well Aged Timbers" [BOARDROOM, August 26], you quote Malaysian Primary Industry Minister Lim Keng Yaik: "It is ridiculous that a 300-year-old tropical log fetches about the same price as a 15-year-old softwood log from the temperate countries." As a furniture designer and manufacturer in the U.S., I'm aware of the truth of that statement. But finding

a solution is no simple task.

The question is: Are the member nations of the International Tropical Timber Organisation intent on selling themselves for short-term gains? Without care and responsibility, precious timber resources will be lost forever. That is what happened in Europe.

If the world's big producers of tropical timber were to unite in fixing certain quotas and prices, they would undoubtedly benefit and so would the world's forests. Put simply, if the value of such wood were to double and export volumes were halved as a consequence, the revenue going to private industry and governments wouldn't change. They would get the same revenue by felling half a forest instead of all of it. The higher prices in turn would prompt the consuming nations to re-evaluate their demand criteria.

With its special qualities (low cost and ample supplies being additional factors), mahogany is used in abundance in the making of consuming nations' furniture. The qualities of such a distinctive hardwood lie deep within it — in the beauty and richness of its grain, its evenness, its lightness, its efficiency. Yet this and other quality wood is being supplied at prices well below what the markets themselves suggest prices should be.

What a market can bear is of course a matter for speculation. Nonetheless, the unnecessary uses and various abuses of remarkably beautiful and sometimes unique timber compel me to voice my opinion. Now that nature's delicate ecological balance has been tipped on a negative course, the consequences will increase. We must take stock and be forewarned.

As individuals and as nations we must have the courage to say "No" to the corruption and greed in the timber business — and save our lives in the process. Let's see to it that our governments and private industry channel some of the immense profits into research. If we can set foot on the moon, surely we have the wisdom and intellect to develop an infinite number of new fast-growing tropical hardwoods.

KEATH SANDERSON
El Prado, New Mexico, U.S.A.

The Burma Uprising

As a Burmese, I feel Aung Gyi's views on the role of Ne Win [INTERVIEW, October 21] are irrelevant because the damage is already done. Thousands have been killed or maimed. Thousands more have had to flee for

their lives to the jungle. The country is broken and people greatly demoralised by the brutal suppression and terrorism by soldiers in the streets of the cities. Even worse off are the very poor, forced to serve as jungle porters.

Over the years, Ne Win threw out all capable people of integrity, including Aung Gyi. Ne Win surrounded himself with people who are like dogs on a leash. Even San Yu, when he was president, dared not look Ne Win in the face, so great was the dread generated by the force of Ne Win's personality.

The entire responsibility, even at this critical juncture, lies with Ne Win. No apologies now can erase the anguish of all the mothers and fathers who have lost their sons and daughters, or the agony of those now being tortured and maimed in detention.

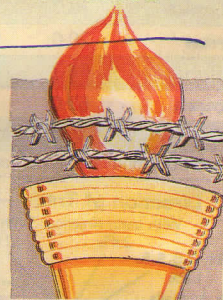
NAME WITHHELD
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Germany at the Games

In "German Medal Muscle" [ALMANAC, October 14], you imply Germany was one nation only from 1938 to 1945. That would be wrong. After several attempts to form a federation (Deutscher Bund) of the large number of German states, Germany was first united from 1871 till 1918 as a constitutional monarchy under the Kaiser. The first German republic (Weimar) was constituted in 1919 and ended in 1933 with the Nazi régime. In 1938 Austria, which was never part of the German nation, and later Czechoslovakia were forced to join the German Reich. The Reich ended in 1945. Divided by the Allies, Germany emerged as two separate states. Today, as in the case of Korea, there are two states but still one nation.

Journalists prefer to present the Olympics as the battle of nations rather than as the games of athletes. I presume Germans would prefer to see unification rather than emphasis on the side that wins more medals or has the bigger muscles.

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Write Letters Dept., *Asiaweek*, 22 Westlands Road, Hongkong. All letters intended for publication must include the writer's name & address, though names will be withheld when necessary. Letters are subject to editing as clarity and space require.