

BURMA

A Calm Farewell in Rangoon

It was the largest gathering in the streets since the tumultuous days of protest in August and September. This time, however, the crowds in Rangoon were in a solemn mood: they had gathered to pay last respects to the late Daw Khin Kyi, widow of nationalist hero Aung San and mother of key opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Well aware of the emotions running high, security forces were out in full strength. Students, too, turned out in massive numbers, carrying union banners. But the event went off with the dignity it deserved, leading some foreign diplomats to argue that Burma was now clearly calm enough for elections to be held.

Khin Kyi, 76, who had been confined to her bed since early last year by a series of strokes, died on Dec. 27. She had met Aung San in wartime 1942 when he was admitted to a Rangoon hospital. They married a few months later. However, their life together ended with Aung San's assassination on the eve of Burma's Independence in 1947. Venerated as the slain leader's widow, Khin Kyi served in various roles in the government and was ambassador to India from 1960 till she retired in 1967.

By a quirk of fate, her recent incapacitation catapulted her Oxford-based daughter into an unexpected political role. After Aung San Suu Kyi returned in April to care for her mother, massive demonstrations demanding democracy and econ-



Aung San, Khin Kyi, Aung San U, 1943

Asiaweek Pictures

omic reforms broke out against strongman Ne Win. Two presidents stepped down in quick succession. In the absence of traditional opposition leaders, the nationalist's daughter appeared an attractive choice. Suu Kyi, 43, was soon at the head of the growing movement that gave rise to the National League for Democracy and

other opposition groups. Then everything came to a brutal stop when Gen. Saw Maung took over. He unleashed a bloody crackdown and banned all public gatherings.

Khin Kyi's Jan. 2 funeral drew massive crowds, estimated at up to 400,000 people. The government honoured her with interment in a burial place reserved for national figures, near the ancient Shwedagon Pagoda. Suu Kyi turned down the offer of a full state funeral, but accepted military help in the arrangements. Busloads of nurses and Buddhist nuns preceded the white coffin, followed by Suu Kyi and elder brother Aung San U, 45, an engineer back from the U.S. for the occasion. He told Asiaweek: "I'm not aligned to any particular group in Rangoon. My view is to see if we can all find a solution with a minimum of bloodshed to get Burma back on a democratic path."

Political party representatives, ambassadors, and government officials led by Home Minister Maj.-Gen. Phone Myint joined the procession. Tensions were muted. Some students distributed pamphlets while others interspersed political slogans with songs honouring Aung San and Khin Kyi. However, the National League for Democracy, which organised the ceremonies, deployed student leaders along the 8-km route to prevent the event from deteriorating into a protest. Whether Saw Maung would take that into account when deciding a timetable for the long-promised polls remained to be seen.



Students and Karens: "100% safe"

Voja M.

TESTS

Going Home

For the 80 refugees who boarded the Rangoon-bound military plane in Thailand's Tak Province on Dec. 26, the return home was a test of their government's sincerity in offering amnesty. Many of them, in their late teens and early 20s, had fled after the military takeover on Sept. 18. From Rangoon they were shuttled to their home towns, where they were received by local military officials and entrusted to waiting families. Since then 72 more students have returned. The amnesty, which grew from talks in Rangoon Dec. 14 between Thai army chief Gen. Chaovalit Yongchaiyuth and Burmese military ruler Gen. Saw Maung, will continue until at least Jan. 31.

Rangoon says some 3,000 youths have sought refuge with Karen guerrillas near the Thai border. Hundreds more have linked up with other groups. Soon

after taking power, the army declared that it would not harm innocent students who wished to return. But there were persistent reports of abuses. One mother told Asiaweek of her 14-year-old son's secret return in November to the town of Mudon from a Mon guerilla camp. After two weeks of hiding him, she reported his presence to the town's Law and Order Restoration Council. The boy was taken away "for interrogation." Next day, an army sergeant informed the horrified mother that they "overdid it." They would not return the body.

Kyaw San, spokesman for the military régime, faced stiff questioning during the Dec. 26 homecoming. "How much guarantee is there that these refugees will be safe?" asked a journalist. "100%," shot back Kyaw San. Thai student leaders said they would hold Chaovalit responsible if anything happened to the returnees. Indeed, his high-profile involvement seemed the students' best guarantee.