

BURMA

Polls Countdown

The military régime of Gen. Saw Maung last week edged a little closer to fulfilling its promise of holding multi-party elections, but it was hardly in a hurry. On Feb. 16, the government's election commission announced a timetable indicating that polls would take place some time in May 1990. A draft election law will be published on March 1 this year, the commission said, and a month would be allowed for "suggestions and opinions from the people and political parties and organisations." Using a tabular format in the style of a countdown, it listed the "expected period" of this phase as "elections date minus fourteen months." Promulgation of a final election law and rules would follow, culminating in "fixing of the period of canvassing for votes" — scheduling the campaign — at minus three months. Although oppositionists main-

tained a wait-and-see stance, an official spokesman said the timetable "should once and for all dispel the doubts and misgivings cast on the government."

A day after the announcement, Japan officially recognised Saw Maung's régime. Tokyo had withheld recognition of the government and suspended economic assistance after the general



Dominic Faulder — Bureau Banplok

Saw Maung

took power in September and crushed pro-democracy demonstrations. Japanese officials said the change was mainly due to significant improvements in law and order in the country. With recognition came partial resumption of Japanese aid. Sources said an \$86 million set of loans signed last year would go back on stream immediately, covering help with Rangoon airport expansion, the South Nawin dam near Prome and the Lawpita hydro-electric project. Some emergency humanitarian aid would also go through, but Tokyo officials said they would monitor the country's progress before providing any new money. Japan is normally Burma's main donor of foreign aid, providing about 60% of the total. Its assistance amounts to \$200 million-\$230 million per year.

The news from Tokyo was no doubt heartening to an administration still facing serious resentment. The official press warned civil servants to stop "malicious acts" and "slander" against the government. A huge and mysterious fire also broke out in the southern town of Mergui, devastating an area populated by well-to-do Sino-Burmese traders and leaving some 20,000 people homeless. ■

LETTERS

Soldiers of Tenno Heika

To the editors of *Asiaweek*



You regard it as "curious" that "Lord Mountbatten's forces took so few prisoners from the India-border battle of Imphal, which took a shocking toll of Japanese lives, and from the recapture of Burma" [EDITORIAL, January 27].

Imphal was the key to India and the Japanese launched an all-out attack on it. General Tanaka, commanding the 33rd Division, wrote in his Order of the Day: "The coming battle is the turning point. It will denote the success or failure of the Greater East Asia War." He wrote that "it must be expected that the Division will be almost annihilated" and warned all what to expect from their officers if they failed in their duty.

You find it incredible that Japanese soldiers refused to surrender. Anyone who was engaged in the Burma Campaign will testify to the bravery and defiant spirit of the Japanese soldier. Field Marshal Slim, commander of the 14th Army, wrote of them: "There can be no question of the courage and hardihood of the Japanese soldiers. I know of no army that could have equalled them."

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Meeting Saw Maung

General Saw Maung told you there will be a multiparty election in Burma [INTERVIEW, January 27] but his words are not backed by the actions of his régime. If the military is sincere about restoring democracy why does it punish peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators? There are many examples of leading doctors, lawyers, civil servants and others who supported evolution to democracy and were fired, arrested, transferred to remote areas, or kept in continuous terror. These members of the country's "natural" élite were not affiliated with any political party during the uprising.

How can political parties prepare for an election campaign when gatherings of more than five persons are forbidden? My fear is that the military has no intention of giving up power even if "law and order" is restored. The army will try to

"invigorate" the economy though the past 26 years have shown that it simply cannot do it. Its ill-conceived and mis-directed policies turned one of Southeast Asia's richest countries into one of the world's poorest. Why should the Burmese people and the world believe that self-proclaimed students of Ne Win can do any better?

Many Burmese experts in various fields are willing to share their ideas and efforts if they can express them freely and without reprisal. Many who left Burma because of economic necessity are eager to return to their homeland with expertise and capital when the government is truly a government of the people, working for the benefit of the people, and elected by the people. Only when democracy is restored and the military is back in the barracks will foreign investment and aid pour in.

If General Saw Maung truly loves his country and sincerely wants to "save Burma" he should immediately start talks with the major political parties, set the date, and make sure the country has a free and fair election in 1989.

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■ How many times does the military have to "save Burma" in this rather extraordinary way?

The best way to save Burma is to restore democracy, human rights, justice for all, and internal peace. But on the question of ethnic insurgency General Saw Maung asserts: "We have no plans whatsoever for a ceasefire" [INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, February 3]. He also claims that "the whole world is aware that the Kachin insurgent [leader] Brang Seng is trafficking in opium." If that's the case, how come I "went all over the world, to West Germany, Japan, the U.K.," as Saw Maung told you? Is he accusing these countries of welcoming and extending hospitality to a "drug trafficker"?

Saw Maung told the magazine my trips abroad gave his régime "a lot of trouble." The fact is that wherever I went I raised the question of international support for restoring peace, democracy and human rights in Burma. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

Without peace and normalcy in our country, the opium problem — which is affecting everyone, both in Burma and outside — cannot be solved. Since Saw Maung seems to be uninterested in restoring peace in Burma, it is reasonable to assume he has a vested

interest in keeping the opium issue alive. In this way he can hope to attract outside help for meaningless "opium eradication programs" in the course of which Burma's production increases steadily while his officers in the field reap handsome kickbacks from the traffickers.

If he has nothing to hide, why doesn't his régime invite outsiders to see for themselves, independently, what the situation is like in the minority areas where the poppies are grown? We Kachins have already done so, as can be seen in your EYEWITNESS titled "Burmese Odyssey" [January 20].

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■ Having joined the ranks of subscribers to the magazine thanks to recent prison democratisation measures, I have to confess I am more than taken aback by the undue confidence and self-righteousness of Saw Maung, the head of the Burmese military regime [INTERVIEW, January 27]. Gross distortion of reality aside, what I regret is that Saw Maung thought it necessary to invoke Korea's army and ex-president as if to justify his increasingly dubious conscience.

In no way can Saw Maung's coterie be compared with the Korean Army, which still gets a good deal of respect from the Korean people as a whole. Given the difficulties experienced by certain Korean officers, Saw Maung should be reminded that his future will be no different from theirs if he continues on his present course.

Self-seeking élitism and a false sense of mission within military establishments is a problem common to many countries in Asia, Africa and South America. My country has no better record yet is in the process of working towards viable alternatives. My heart aches with sympathy for those valiant people of Burma who with courage and determination defy all odds in [reaching for] a just society. I sincerely hope they will soon pull through this difficult situation.

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