

## A LESSON FROM HISTORY

For countries in political evolution, although it is usual, particularly by the popular media, to attribute present day problems to present day actions of political leaders and governments, most historians and visionaries tend to rationalize on the basis that the prevailing situation today could be a reaction to the deeds of yesteryears. Therefore, to impose solutions to current crises simply by transplanting a course of action that worked in another part of the world, may be seen as unwise, risky and even amounting to dangerous experimentation at others expense. In this context in an editorial of this Embassy's News Release (No. 13 of 25, July 1997) we mentioned a certain documentary on British TV that chronicled an "intriguing conspiracy" between the elements of post world war II British Conservative Government and certain political figures of Myanmar found to be guilty assassinating General Aung San and his cabinet on July 19, 1947.

The complicity of the colonialist government that attempted to install its political ally immediately before granting "Independence" by violently eliminating the true national leader who could possibly keep the country united have been suspected all throughout Myanmar's post independent history by many scholars. But this is the first time more confirmatory evidence (papers classified as "sensitive") have been released from credible British sources. The death of General Aung San and the British instigators that prompted and supported the "Karenistan" concept, according to these documents, were almost certainly responsible for the train of historical events that ultimately led to the present day requirement of a strong military force to keep the country united and the almost sisyphian task of getting the Karen National Union (KNU) to return to the legal fold.

While over 90% of the former insurgents have abandoned their policies of armed struggle and returned to join the real "Union" with the rest of Myanmar -- it is not impossible that some of those "invisible forces" and their conspirators are still supporting one way or the other the last vestiges of the pro-colonialist insurgency that they themselves organized and created fifty years ago. Without a doubt, it was a neatly veiled attempt by the colonial government to retain its hold on the resource rich country. But then, truth cannot be concealed forever and the historical data on which historians may rationalize the present day events are now evident and clear.

The new spine-chilling evidence in these "sensitive" documents with some pages still deleted, obtained and revealed in a broadcast by Fergal Keane on this case also appeared in-print in the Guardian weekly on July 27, 1997 entitled "Was Britain behind Aung San's death?". Certain crucial passages are hereby excerpted to elucidate the circumstances that the present Government of Myanmar has called "The great responsibility that history bestowed on the Tatmadaw" (Thamaing-Pay-Tar-Wun) and

what in western perspective is seen as "repression".

According to Mr. Keane "Burma's nationalist hero, Aung San and five of his ministers were murdered at 10:37 in the morning of July 19, 1947, during a cabinet meeting. With his murder Burma was plunged into political chaos, the ultimate result of which would be the ride to power of the military and decades of isolation and repression"

"Aung San was deeply dissatisfied (with the Japanese Military Administration) and planned to join the Allies. Churchill was appalled. He regarded Aung San as the "traitor rebel of a quisling army."

At the end of the war Aung San was indisputably the most significant figure in Burmese politics. In 1947, he negotiated Burma's independence from Britain with Clement Attlee. His assassination was one of the most catastrophic political murders of modern times -- in relative terms more destructive even than the killing of John F. Kennedy. And, like that more famous death, it is also shrouded in mystery.

The official history says a rival Burmese politician motivated by revenge and jealousy killed Aung San. But recently declassified British government documents and new witnesses have thrown new light on the mystery.

... These weapons and the guns that killed Aung San and his cabinet were soon traced to thefts arranged by two serving British army officers, Captain David Vivian and Major Henry Young. But the plot went far wider than this.

... U Saw wrote a letter to John Stewart Bringley, British Council representative in Rangoon.

The contents of the letter were explosive: in it U Saw threatened to make "disclosures that would have international repercussions". He sounded an even more ominous note in a later letter when he demanded Bringley's assistance on the grounds that he had "taken a grave risk as advised".

...Meanwhile, Carlyle Seppings (British CID) was turning up evidence of the involvement of other British officers, but was ordered to stop his investigation. The police chief told him: "This is getting too big for both you and me, and if we are not careful we are going to tread on some very important corns." U Saw was convicted of conspiracy to murder and sentenced to death. He always publicly denied his guilt.

Two days before the execution, Seppings went to visit him in prison to ask why he had not fled after the murders." ..... He said, 'Government House told me things would be all right'. U Saw was hanged on May 1, 1948.

After the hanging came the trial of Captain Vivian charged with arranging arms thefts and conspiracy with U Saw. ....  
He was convicted and sentenced to five years but escaped the following year. ....

One file on the affair in the Public Record Office was made available in 1996. In a top secret memo to Whitehall by the British Ambassador in Rangoon, Carlyle Sepping's former boss, Tun Hla Oung (Chief of Police) is reported as being "now virtually convinced that there was British connivance in the assassinations". Tun Hla Oung believes U Saw was working with British support for the overthrow of Aung San's government. He thinks John Stewart Bringley was the middleman between U Saw and a powerful group of people in London led by a former Governor of Burma and Conservative cabinet minister, Sir Reginald Dorman Smith.

Two days after the assassination, the Labour MP Tom Driberg stood up in the House of Common and said: "The moral guilt of the assassinations attaches less, perhaps, to the brutal gunmen in Rangoon than to the comfortable Conservative gentlemen here who incited U Saw to treachery and sabotage."

... Other documents released by the Foreign Office reveal a conspiratorial group of Conservative politicians, soldiers and other public figures who were devoted to the overthrow of the government of independent Burma before and after the transfer of power in 1948. The documents show that the group -- the Friends of the Burma Hill Peoples -- was formed in February 1947, five months before Aung San was killed and while U Saw was in London. ....

The key figure was Sir Reginald Dorman Smith, who had ruled the country through U Saw when he was prime minister there during the war.

The group believed in separate independence for some of Burma's ethnic minorities, especially the Karens, who had been adamant of gaining independence from Burma since the end of the war, and not without reason. In 1942, when Aung San led his Burmese Independence Army into Burma with Japanese, many Karens remained loyal to the British.

Dorman Smith and his friends felt strongly that they should not let down their loyal wartime allies. They also felt that Aung San and the nationalist leadership might take Burma into the communist bloc, whereas the Karens would unquestionably remain pro-Western. The territory the Karens claimed, Karenistan, included some of Burma's richest mineral and metal deposits.

The Friends thought they were pursuing a noble cause. But if they were involved in the killing of Aung San, as the evidence suggests, they were responsible for the single most damaging act in the history of Burma. It is a lesson we would do well to remember: that today's

repression can be rooted in yesterday's short-sighted political manipulation."

Yes, the great Aung San died and by 1949 the then Union of Burma descended into decades of vicious in-fighting. Still, similar horrific scenarios were later replayed by another world power in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, turning South East Asia's "Indochina" into an unparalleled battle ground with a cruel display of its destructive power using massive bombs, napalm, agent orange etc. before it was forced to abandon its misguided objective. Myanmar, grappling with its own multi-coloured insurgencies, managed to stay out of the raging wars by observing strict political and economic neutrality while retaining full diplomatic ties with all major powers and international organizations. Even this period, dubbed "isolation" by the western media, had a strong historical reason related to the fear of recurrent big power domination and their proxy wars. Of course, there was a price for it to be paid for in economic terms.

But the Karen insurgency is still alive, although having to fight for its survival, along a small strip of Myanmar's border in the remote and malarious jungles. They have lost practically all support within their own country and even among their own nationality (barely 10% of Kayin people). They are being sustained only by their so-called "friends" abroad.

It may now be interesting for investigative reporters to look into whether the designs of present day "Friends of Burma" are in any way similar to that of the "Friends of Hill Peoples of Burma" who had been sowing the seeds of discord among the nationalities of Myanmar since 1947.

These "friends" would do well to remember the lesson from Fergal Keane's story. It is especially true for those in a country that is sensitive to its own unity issue.

If ever a lesson from history is to be put to good use, this is the time to discourage any short sighted political manipulations in the internal affairs of all developing countries.