



Aung San Suu Kyi: It's the Slorc, again.

BURMA

Standard Reflex

Junta cracks down on opponents, again

By Bertil Lintner in Bangkok

Just as its international image was beginning to improve, Burma's ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council has once again bared its fangs.

On September 27, the Slorc's riot police and troops wielding clubs and automatic rifles sealed off the Rangoon residence of Burma's main opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Her home on the capital's University Avenue has been the focus of weekly opposition gatherings since she was released from house arrest in July last year. The offence this time: Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, had planned to celebrate its eighth anniversary with a rally at her residence.

By the start of October, say NLD sources, more than 500 democracy activists had been rounded up. Suu Kyi's phone lines were cut and only the military was allowed anywhere near her house. Even a few tourists who ventured too close were briefly detained.

The timing of the crackdown left observers puzzled. Malaysia had just endorsed Burma's entry into Asean. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were considering resuming economic assistance. American companies

had lobbied with reasonable success to get the United States Congress to water down a bill that could have triggered tourism and trade sanctions against Burma.

Those gains may now be scuttled. Washington was quick to condemn the crack-down. Under the legislation, now awaiting President Bill Clinton's signature, U.S. businesses would be barred from making new investments in Burma "if Slorc physically harms, rearrests, or exiles Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, or continues its repression of the democracy movement."

In Tokyo, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Seiroku Kajiyama told a news conference: "Japan can't overlook moves that run counter to the democratization of Burma." Even more worry-

ing for Slorc, Thailand and the Philippines have expressed strong reservations about Burma's early admission to Asean.

These were predictable reactions—to all except Burma's military rulers, it seems. Observers in Burma are asking why the junta seems so unwilling to listen either to its own people—who voted overwhelmingly for the NLD in 1990 general election—or the international community.

One possible answer, says Josef Silverstein, a Burma scholar at Rutgers University in the U.S., is that "the Burmese generals are living in a mythical world which they have created for themselves." The generals' world view is reinforced by their ties to the leaders of China and the other isolated regimes. "They have no concept of what internationally acceptable standards of behaviour should be," says Silverstein.

Nor do they seem to know what free political activities are: Burma's embassy in Bangkok justified the crackdown by saying the NLD planned to present demands and "the government, therefore, was compelled to take pre-emptive action."

Tzang Yawng hwe, an academic and son of Burma's first president, Sao Shwe Thaik, says the military has a decades-old siege mentality. Gen. Ne Win, who seized power in 1962, "introduced his own one-man rule over the military as well as society, and weeded out all officers with any real competence or independent thinking." Those who are left "don't understand how the world works," says Vancouver-based Yawng hwe.

The official media in Rangoon say Suu Kyi's Saturday speeches may not be tolerated in future. But why this intolerance of political debate? The men of Slorc, says Silverstein, are "very scared and insecure. That's why they react in this way." ■