

The Global Maritime Distress and Safety System

Stalemate in Rangoon

Whether the so-called plea should be interpreted as an order is, on the face of it, beside the point. What is important is the fact that Major General Khin Nyunt, the head of Burma's military intelligence, has "requested" the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to leave the country for good and rejoin her family in England. The General has, in effect, asked the Chief of the National League for Democracy (NLD), who has been under house arrest for nearly two years, to give up the role she is destined to play in Burma's transition from military dictatorship to democracy.

The landslide victory won by the opposition NLD and its allies in the election in May, 1990, had raised hopes that, despite the bloody repression that had preceded the polls, the military would hand over power to the elected government without any delay. Far from choosing this straightforward and honourable course, the junta has moved completely in the opposite direction. A wave of arrests has followed, together with several repressive measures adopted against students, democrats and all opposition forces. An impression has been created, inside Burma and outside, that junta is in no mood to surrender power to an elected government and, in the worst possible scenario, it might reach a compromise with any splinter group to remain in power or order a fresh election.

The uncertainties created by the military junta and the delay in the transfer of power have started affecting the morale within the opposition camp. Several anti-government leaders have left Rangoon and set up what is described as a government-in-exile which appears to be somewhat ineffective in changing the status quo. On the other hand, there are also rumours that Ms Suu Kyi has laid down certain conditions for leaving Burma. It seems that she would not mind giving up her chance to be an elected Prime Minister of the country if full democracy is restored to Burma. Another rumour is most disconcerting. It is said that the executive committee of NLD has succumbed to the pressure from the military junta and removed Ms Suu Kyi from any official position in the organisation. Is there any guarantee that the departure of the NLD leader from Burma would facilitate the transfer of power from the army to an elected government? Most observers answer the question in the negative.

The international community which had once hailed the landslide victory of the opposition in the election last year appears to be somewhat less vocal than before in discussing the stalemate in Burma. What's worse, a number of countries in Asia have not only relaxed their pressure on Rangoon for accepting the 1990 polls results but stepped up their trade, especially in the extraction of Burma's precious but depleted timber, and financial assistance. In effect, these countries have given a new lease of life to the junta in Rangoon.

The wind of change that is blowing through half the world, from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to South Asia, has certainly reached Burma, once described as the "country gone underground." It is understandable that power-loving junta refuses to accept the reality of the situation. What is surprising — and indeed sad — is the way some countries whose commitment to democracy cannot be questioned seem to be providing some comfort to the dictatorship in Rangoon.

How to Own yet Not Possess

Candour is always welcome. Even if it prompts a blush or causes a heart-break. The association of unpleasantness with candour is celebrated by expressions like 'unpleasant but true' etc. The Parliament on Wednesday was presented with a piece of candour which, however, fitted with none of those categories. And one is at a loss to know how to react to that.

A State Minister told the Parliament that there were a total of 7,018 abandoned houses in the three cities of Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna. He said of those 2,178 have been allotted temporarily, 2650 have been sold out and 2,179 "were not under government possession". Evidently the last category of houses are not quite abandoned, otherwise these would, as a matter of course, be in the possession of the government. For the government to say that something belongs to it, which it said about those houses, and also that these are not in government possession — that is genuine candour.

We compliment the government on this. At the same time we cannot but record our sense of befuddled disbelief about the information served. Who is there in the land more powerful than the government? The Parliament was not told if this was being done through the stratagem of instituting civil suits. That's quite a balking encumbrance and a very popular legal resort for all kinds of dereliction to the operation of law. But we are not sure. And we are not sure how long the 2,179 houses have been in such limbo. One thing we can be pretty certain about — these houses are proud possessions of some villains and are being held because of their value. And also that this couldn't continue as such for many days if government's wrath were not compromised through some informal yet familiar mechanism. This piece of information tends to question the very presence of effective government in the state.

We cannot but underscore the importance of government seeing to it that the property is brought under state control without any further delay. A principle of statecraft is involved here. If it were a question of any one or two or a hundred cases of infringement of law, that could be allowed to be sorted out on a purely local executive level. But when more than two thousand units of government property are being held out of law — something other than the good officer's convenience must be invoked.

We want to emphasize the point specially because the whole question of this abandoned property has ever since the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war been a festering wound on the body of our society. We are keen on seeing some semblance of law having some power over some part of this vicious thing. We know the allotments have been less than fair and we know the selling operations were heavily influenced in most cases. And we know one of the most rotten basic instincts of animadversion was involved here — the instinct to possess. We want to emphasise our little point because of these, and perhaps in spite of these.

RADIO was first used to save life at sea in March 1899 when it was used by a lightship to report that the steamer "Elbe" had run aground. It was also in 1899 that the first ship was fitted with radio. Since that time radiocommunications have proved to be paramount importance to safety at sea.

In 1912, some three months after the passenger ship "Titanic" disaster occurred with the loss of more than 1500 lives, an international radio conference met in London to review and amend the 1906 International Radiotelegraph Convention which prescribed the distress and calling frequencies, classes of ship service (watchkeeping), ships' radio equipment, requirements for certification of operators for ship stations. Later in January 1914, also in London, an international maritime conference adopted the first International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), which required certain ships to carry an MF radiotelegraph installation.

The subsequent 1929, 1948, 1960 and 1974 SOLAS Conventions all required passenger ships and cargo ships of 1600 tons gross tonnage and upwards to carry a radiotelegraph station. It was not until 1948 that requirements for MF radiotelephone stations were included in the Convention and then only for ships of between 300 and 1600 tons gross tonnage not fitted with an MF radiotelegraph station. Limited requirements for a VHF radiotelephone station for safety of navigation were included in SOLAS in 1974 but it was not until 1981 that requirements for all SOLAS ships to be capable of communicating with each other by VHF and MF radiotelephone were achieved.

The existing Morse radiotelegraphy and radiotelephone system, with a required MF communication range of 100-150 nautical miles, provided a distress system based, if time permitted, on alerting ships in the vicinity of the distress and coast stations within range. The system therefore did not cover ships which suddenly sank or ships in distress which were too far away from those who could assist.

Improvement of radiocommunications

In the early 1970s, IMO in close cooperation with ITU's International Radio Consultative Committee (CCIR), started active preparations for the establishment of a maritime satellite communication system to serve the maritime community; CCIR preparing the technical bases of the system and IMO the operational requirements, a cost benefit analysis and a draft Convention, which was

World Telecommunication Day is celebrated by member countries of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) every year this day (May 17). The date coincides with the date of signature in Paris, in 1865, of the first International Telegraph Convention which set up the International Telegraph Union, the forerunner of today's International Telecommunication Union.

adopted in 1977 and resulted in the establishment of the INMARSAT Organization in 1979.

In 1973 IMO adopted a resolution, a policy document on development of the maritime distress system which outlined the steps that should be taken to gradually improve the existing system and ultimately achieve what was then the distant future system and is now known as the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS).

IMO also sought to improve search and rescue (SAR) world-wide for those in distress at sea and, concurrent with the development of the INMARSAT Convention, prepared the SAR Convention which was adopted in 1979. SAR under the Convention is based upon coordination of all SAR operations, wherever they occur in the world, by responsible authorities ashore (rescue coordination centres (RCCs)).

Development of the GMDSS

The advent of INMARSAT enabled the development of the GMDSS through a carefully considered integration of satellite and modern terrestrial radiocommunication techniques and procedures. Development of the GMDSS required very close cooperation between ITU

and IMO: IMO developing the operational requirements and equipment performance standards and CCIR recommending the equipment technical specifications and procedures for its use; the ITU 1983 World Administrative Conference (WARC) adopting necessary provisions in the Radio Regulations to test the system and prove the various equipment to be used; the ITU WARC-MOB 87 adopting the necessary amendments to the Radio Regulations to introduce the GMDSS, and IMO adopting in 1988 amendments to the SOLAS Convention, to implement the GMDSS on ships.

In the late 1970s several countries, particularly the United States and the USSR, began experiments with satellites which resulted in the COSPAS-SARSAT system being established well before implementation of the GMDSS. Since that time the system has provided a significant contribution to SAR operations and has assisted in saving hundreds of lives.

In the later 1970s, IMO in cooperation with IHO, established the world-wide navigation warning service (WWNWS) for the coordination and broadcast of navigational warnings to ships.

The GMDSS will be fully implemented in 1999 when, except possibly for a few re-

maining stations, use of Morse radiotelegraphy by ships will cease after 100 years of dedicated and faithful service.

The concept

The concept of the GMDSS is based on use of the most up-to-date radiocommunication technologies to provide a comprehensive distress and safety system of communication between ships and between ships and the shore and vice versa wherever in the world the ships may be situated. The functional requirements of the GMDSS include transmitting and receiving ship-to-shore and shore-to-ship distress alerts, ship-to-ship distress alerts, SAR coordinating communications, on-scene communications, signals for locating, maritime safety information (MSI), general radiocommunications, and bridge-to-bridge (navigational) communications.

Area of operation

The basic principle of the ship always being able to communicate with the shore from wherever it is situated in the world enabled an area of operation concept to be established for application of the GMDSS and for ships to fit, in addition to that necessary for ship-to-ship communications, equipment necessary for communicating with those coast stations or coast earth

stations, established by administrations, to meet GMDSS needs, which would be within range during the ships' voyages. The GMDSS Master Plan, being developed by IMO, divides the navigable waters of the world into four sea areas dependent upon the means of communication used.

Compatibility

To achieve good commercial communications and ensure the efficient and economic operation of their ships, shipowners have generally fitted the best radiocommunication equipment on their ships and in doing so, have also improved the standards of distress and safety communications of their ships above the minimum standards of the SOLAS Convention. The GMDSS will encourage shipowners to continue this practice, as its development has been paralleled by development of similar commercial communication systems by INMARSAT and CCIR, which proved unattended instant access to ships and from ships to the shore, e.g. INMARSAT provides an extensive range of high quality and improved commercial services which are also finding favour in the aeronautical and land mobile services; digital selective calling and improved terrestrial services are also available for commercial use in accordance with the Recommendations of CCIR.

Emergency alerting capability

The GMDSS also takes into account the possibility of a ship suddenly sinking or the cause of the distress destroying the radio station and the need for a distress alert capability in such cases. This is provided by means of a satellite emergency position-indicating radio beacon (EPIRB) that is capable of floating free from the sinking ship and being automatically activated or being manually activated on board and transmitting the ship's identity and either its position (INMARSAT) or a signal which provides the ship's position (COSPAS-SARSAT).

Safety

As the satellite EPIRB is portable and can be carried into survival craft and will provide a position accuracy better than 5 kms, survival craft in the GMDSS will be provided with portable VHF transceivers, on-scene communications and search and rescue radar transponders (SARTs) for final location by

SAR units arriving at the distress position.

It is essential for safety that ships receive relevant navigational warnings, meteorological warnings and forecasts. SAR and other urgent information (MSI) for the part of the world in which they are situated. In the GMDSS this will be provided by automated unattended reception of printed MSI though, broadcasts in coastal waters, by the international NAVTEX service and elsewhere through the INMARSAT Safety NET service or by HF direct-printing telegraphy.

Equipment

The GMDSS will use existing methods of direct-printing telegraphy and radiotelephony for communications which were in operation both terrestrially and via satellite before the GMDSS was developed and new equipment which had to be proved during development.

All GMDSS equipment is required to comply with IMO operational performance standards and the Recommendations of CCIR and to be approved by administrations to ensure proper and safe operation.

To ensure equipment availability in the GMDSS, ships will use a combination of duplication of equipment, shore-based maintenance or at-sea electronic maintenance capability.

The SOLAS regulations which resulted from the above concept require equipment for different communication services, dependent upon the sea area in which ships trade.

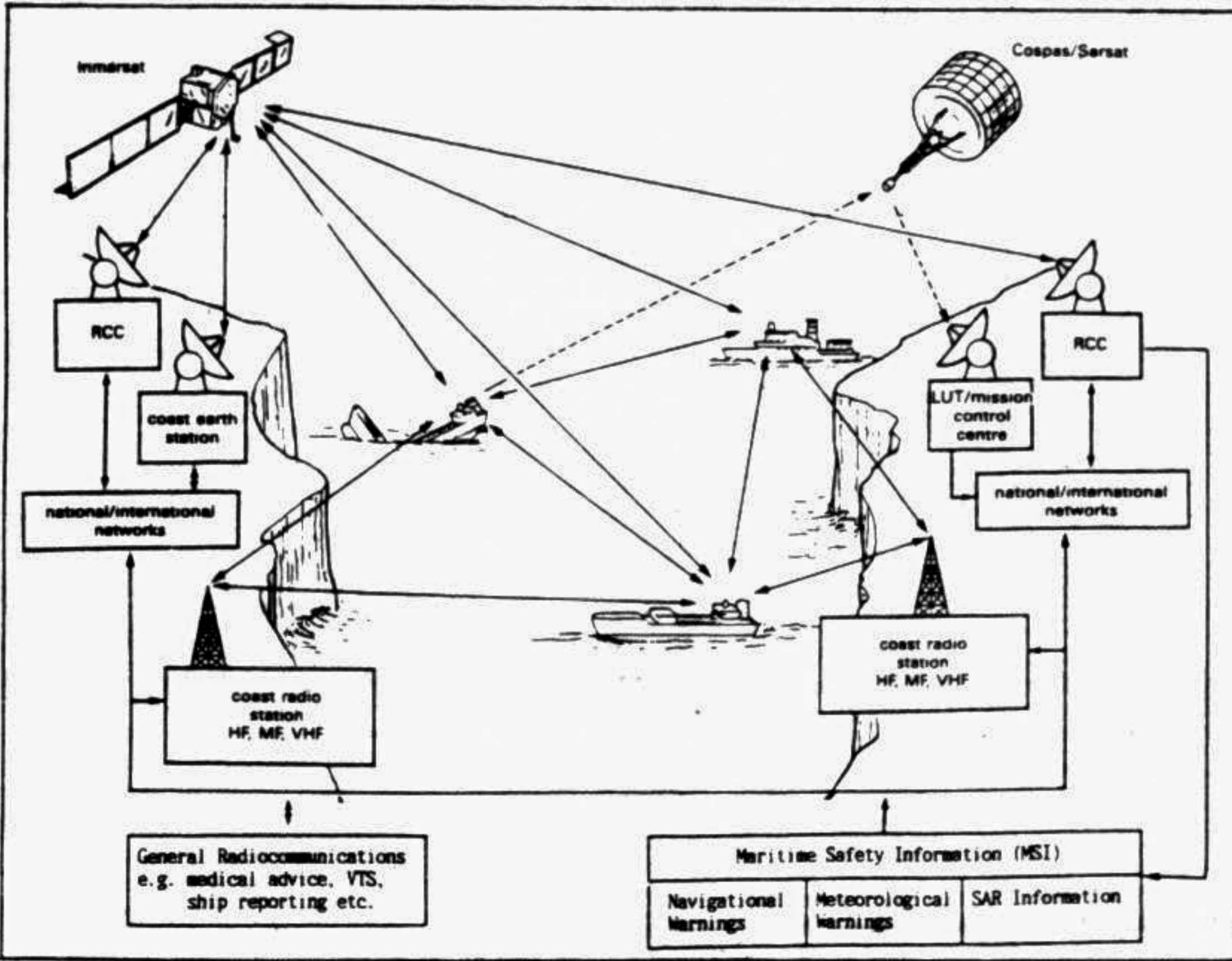
Implementation

Implementation of the GMDSS will be phased to allow for equipment redundancy as follows: 1) all ships to be fitted with a NAVTEX receiver and satellite EPIRB by 1 August 1993; 2) all ships constructed before 1 February 1992 to be fitted with a radar transponder and two-way radiotelephone apparatus for survival craft by 1 February 1995; 3) all ships constructed after 1 February 1995 to comply with all appropriate requirements for the GMDSS; 4) all ships to be fitted with at least one radar capable of operating in the 9 GHz band by 1 February 1995; 5) all ships to comply with the appropriate requirements for the GMDSS by 1 February 1999.

Conclusion

International cooperation involving IMO, ITU, IHO, WMO, INMARSAT and the COSPAS-SARSAT partners, has resulted in the maritime community being provided with an integrated distress and safety communication system which should enhance significantly the safety of life and property in the harsh environment of the sea.

— ITU-IMO Feature



RECENT top-level changes in Laos' powerful politburo have improved chances of political and economic reforms in Laos, and raised hopes of better ties with its non-communist neighbours and the West.

Acting President Phoumi Thipphavone and the President, Prince Souphanouvong — known as the Red Prince — both stepped down to make way for younger leaders at the close of the fifth party congress last month.

Promotions and retirements have reduced the average age of the 55-member party central committee to about 55, a sprightly leadership compared to the gerontocracy in power in neighbouring China.

"I am very content with the changes, even for my son," Souphanouvong told IPS in an interview.

The prince's son, Khamsone Souphanouvong, won a seat in the Supreme People's Assembly, Laos' parliament.

Change of Generations in Laos

The presence at the party congress of Vietnamese Communist Party Secretary General Nguyen Van Linh and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen indicated that Indo-Chinese unity remains steadfast amid vast changes in the socialist world.

While asserting that the Lao Party could modify communism to fit local conditions, Souphanouvong suggested that the changes sweeping through Eastern Europe could reach Laos. "Anything is possible," he said.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic, the country's official name, is still in fact a one-party state and the Lao Party intends to keep it that way.

The party secretary general and premier, Kaysone Phomvihane, has called for an enhanced role for the communist party. The new central committee is well-versed in

Hopes for Reforms

Philip Smucker writes from Vientiane

Recent changes in the top leadership of Laos have bolstered hopes for political and economic reforms.

Marxist doctrine.

"Most of the newly elected members of the central committee have completed studies in Marxism-Leninism at the intermediate and advanced levels," said the final report on the congress.

But these efforts to consolidate the party's central role in the state have been accompanied by moves to liberalise the political and economic climate.

After prolonged deliberations, Laos is expected to formally adopt its first ever con-

stitution sometime this year.

Human rights groups, including Amnesty International, say they hope that the new charter will guarantee human rights and set up a legal system to replace the current system of summary justice.

These groups estimate that about 30 officials of the pre-1975 regime are still held in work camps. But though Vientiane keeps political dissenters on a tight leash, there have been few reports of torture and abuse.

While Beijing and Hanoi have hardened their stance on political reform, the Lao Party remains relatively open.

Official speeches during the party congress for the first time contained frank and strong criticisms of the government's economic and political record over the past 16 years.

The Congress also reaffirmed Laos' four-year-old experiment to modernise and liberalise its economy.

A new five-year social and economic plan gives the private sector a bigger role in economic development and confirms the shift away from a state-run system towards a more explicit free-market economy.

The plan also calls for the privatisation of the many remaining state enterprises and improved economic ties with the West.

Access to Laotian natural resources will also be granted to interested foreign compa-

nies. This has been coupled with a call for an end to rampant forest destruction.

The allocation of land titles and relocation of mountain tribes to lowland areas are two of Vientiane's priorities.

After normalising relations with China last year, Laos now aims to maintain good ties with all of its neighbours, as well as Western aid donors who are replacing diminishing assistance from the Soviet Union.

There is also a felt need to counter Thailand's growing economic influence in the country and to contain the insurgency being waged by ethnic Hmong tribes that operate from refugee camps across the Thai border.

Though Laos has posted economic growth rates of around 5.5 per cent for the past three years, the country remains desperately poor. Per capita income is less than US\$170 and child mortality remains among the highest in Asia.

—IPS

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Greed of traders

Sir, The colossal loss of life and property during the recent cyclone has put most of us, already barely surviving over the edge.

Our homes are destroyed and in need of emergency repairs. Many can only sit under a few tin sheets of what was once their humble, but somewhat secure abode. All must purchase the bare essentials required to put together again somehow or other a roof over the heads of their family members.

The natural disaster is one thing — something that we seem to be able to take in stride over the years; after all, such things are in the hands of

the Creator. The real disaster is the man-made one, and it is much more difficult to comprehend. A case in point: Before the cyclone, in a typical Upazila of Chittagong essential hardware items, such as nails, binding-wire, rope, twine, etc. was already out of the reach of the poor. One such item say, tin roofing nail, was selling for Tk. 100/kg. The day after the disaster, the price went up to 120/kg. Over the next few days the price rose to 180/kg. Then a sign of relief came to all when words quickly spread that two "Sowdagars" had been arrested for overpricing and taken to the Thana. The village folk were full of praise for the stern and appropriate action of the law-enforcing agents. How-

ever, our hopes were soon dashed, as the very next day, after securing their release (one wonders how without any case being heard) they were back in their shops, and the price was now Taka 200/kg and rising.

Such it is with everything — from hardware to vegetables to labour needed to repair our damaged homes. One continues to hope that the new government will in still confidence in the general public; it does not need much to satisfy us — food, cloth, and a roof over our heads. But that same confidence and trust can be lost just as quickly by such simple ills as these.

Arif, Hathazari Bazar, Chittagong.

Relief distribution

Sir, Rumour floated that relief goods were not reaching properly to the cyclone affected persons. Items, including cooked foods, were dropped from air to water. Instead of land, where there none existed to receive those.

However, it is needless to pay any heed to rumours. Now the duty of all is to see if the relief goods properly come within the reach of the victims. All attempts and endeavours should be resorted to in this respect so that these are not misdropped and mishandled. The unfortunate victims of the cruel cyclone can only survive through care and attention.

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House-making materials

Sir, The Prime Minister of India, at the time of leaving Dhaka the other day, gave hope to our Prime Minister that he would sympathetically consider any indication how else India can help us in future. That has encouraged me to write this letter.

I remember there was very serious flood in 1954 and again in 1955, destroying the houses of 70% or more of our rural

population. The Sher-e-Bangla, who knew the poorer elements in our society better than the better off section, worked out an agreement with India for the import of bamboo, cane and straw (chhan for roofing) worth three crore of Taka. This turned the country-wide tension into joy, as on an Eid day, I remember.

It may now be better an agreement for the import of these three items, say worth Taka thirty crore or more — instead of seeking charity of which India has already given a lot.

Salm Ullah
Naogaon

Gram Sarkar

Sir, As a part of their political commitment, the BNP government is contemplating to re-introduce the Gram Sarkar (local government) system which will act as an effective institution for rural development. The philosophy of Gram Sarkar is indeed very good. This system can ensure

development of local leadership, popular participation and bottom-up planning strategies. But I think, before finally introducing this system, certain factors including past experience should be taken into consideration. First, our rural people are not politically conscious enough to operate the Gram Sarkar system independently. They lack education and there is to an extent, a general lacking of dedication and patriotism. There are also chances of quarrel between the Gram Sarkar and other local administration.

In my opinion, a committee with experts may be constituted to recommend suggestions for the formation of an effective Gram Sarkar. Perhaps, existing upazila administration may be modified to accommodate Gram Sarkar within its framework.

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