are part of Than Shwe's plans to ensure that the draft constitution is approved by the national referendum. And to prepare the ground for fresh elections which are expected to be held sometime next year.

The changes in the government and the army will be the most dramatic since the military seized power more than eighteen years ago. Than Shwe is reportedly planning to give up command of the army, but retains the key post of chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). He is expected to also relinquish the post of defence minister.

"Senior General Than Shwe and deputy senior General Maung Aye are in the process of handing over control of the armed forces to the next generation of generals," according to a senior Burmese military source. Than Shwe has already informed the rest of the ruling junta of the plans which he expected to be the key item at the forthcoming quarterly meeting in the new capital Nay Pyi Daw -- some four hundred kilometres north of Rangoon.

Than Shwe's protégé, General Thura Shwe Man will take command of the armed forces, and the south-eastern regional commander, Thura Myint Aung, is expected to take Maung Aye's post as deputy leader. The regional commander is relatively unknown, but is regarded as one of the few top generals who are neutral -- owing personal alligence to neither Than Shwe or Maung Aye, according to a source in Rangoon close to the country's military leaders.

But Than Shwe and Maung Aye will retain their top posts of chairman and deputy in the junta's ruling council. The SPDC is also expected to change its name to the State Democracy and Development Council to mark the start of the new political era.

Than Shwe is also expected to surrender his position as defence minister in the forthcoming cabinet reshuffle, according to a senior South East Asian diplomat who has regular contact with the Burmese regime.

"This has been Than Shwe's game plan for sometime -- it is only a matter of when," the Chiang Mai-based independent Burmese analyst, Win Min, told *Forum*. "Than Shwe can only do this, though with Maung Aye's agreement," he added.

Over the past eighteen months, Than Shwe has frequently told Thailand's top army commanders that he would retire soon, and that General Thura Shwe Mann would take over as the country's military leader in due course.

These changes have been in the pipeline for at least a year, according to senior Burmese military sources. The massive move of all government offices and the armed forces central command to Pyinmana, started more than a year ago and completed last February, delayed the changes. Now Than Shwe is waiting for the most appropriate time to implement the planned changes.

For the past few months, Than Shwe has not gone to the war office, and only attended crucial meetings like the fortnightly joint SPDC-cabinet session, according to an Asian diplomat who was based in Rangoon until recently. Than Shwe also receives very few visitors, other than General Thura Shwe Mann, who has become his key confidante. Through him he sends orders to Maung Aye and Prime Minister Soe Win. confidante. Through him he sends orders to Maung Aye and Prime Minister Soe Win.

"Although the decision to pass the control of the army to Thura Shwe Mann has been made, it is unlikely to happen before the National Convention has finished drafting the new constitution," a western diplomat based in Rangoon told Forum.

But Than Shwe's failing health may also help determine the timing of the hand-over of control of the armed forces to Thura Shwe Mann. He reportedly suffered a mild stroke more than a year ago, but quickly recovered. But in the past few months there have been renewed signs that Than Shwe's health was deteriorating. Last month the senior general visited Singapore for a medical check-up.

Than Shwe is known to suffer from hypertension and is a diabetic. "He's subject to frequent diabetic rages when his sugar levels get out of control," according to a Burmese army doctor

Time appears to be catching up with the seventy-five-year old senior general, according to diplomats who have recently met the Burmese leader. General Than Shwe is often short of breath, according to one foreign visitor who met him recently.

This may have prompted the senior general to take a back seat for the time being. Than Shwe has become far more reclusive since he moved from Rangoon to Pyinmana last February. He has seldom ventured out of his residence. Only once has he returned to Rangoon, and that was for his daughter's wedding.

For the past few months, Than Shwe has not gone to the war office, and only attended crucial meetings like the fortnightly joint SPDC-cabinet session, according to an Asian diplomat who was based in Rangoon until recently. Than Shwe also receives very few visitors, other than General Thura Shwe Mann, who has become his key confidante. Through him he sends orders to Maung Aye and Prime Minister Soe Win. confidante. Through him he sends orders to Maung Aye and Prime Minister Soe Win.

"This is to ensure that as few people as possible are aware of his failing health," said Win Min. But it is also preparing the ground for his handing over of control of the armed forces to Thura Shwe Mann. Although he may retire as the army chief, he will not be relinquishing his power.

General Than Shwe intends to