



Min Ko Naing (centre), a student leader from the failed 1988 pro-democracy uprising, waving to supporters at a pagoda last Saturday, after his release from prison. Myanmar's release of political prisoners has drawn praise from long-time critics of its once-authoritarian government, but obstacles remain as the country embarks on the reform path. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Myanmar's road to democracy

BY ALISTAIR D. B. COOK & BRIDGET WELSH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

LAST week's release of more than 600 political prisoners and signing of the peace agreement with the Karen National Union are markers of transformative ongoing processes of national reconciliation and democratisation taking place in Myanmar. The developments are substantive, as power is moving away from the military towards the civilian leadership. The changes are revolutionary, given nearly 50 years of military government.

An estimated 650 prisoners were released, believed to be a third of the political prisoners held. What distinguishes these releases is the diversity that they represent of the government's oppo-

nents. They include leaders of the Shan ethnic group, the 1988 Generation students, journalists and monks involved in the 2007 uprising dubbed the "Saffron Revolution". The list includes Shan leader Khun Tun Oo; Min Ko Naing, Nilar Thein, Ko Jimmy and Htay Kywe of the '88 Generation Student Group; journalists Zaw Thet Htwe, Ngwe Soe Linn, Hla Hla Win and blogger Nay Phone Latt; and monk U Gambira.

The move also saw former prime minister Khin Nyunt released from house arrest and let out military intelligence officials who were purged in 2003. This group was seen to be pushing the country towards political opening by beginning dialogue with Ms Aung San Sui Kyi and ethnic communities, only to be jailed and removed from power. Almost a decade later, reforms are finally bearing fruit. President Thein Sein is show-

ing that his government means business when it talks about transformation.

The manner of the releases illustrates the presence of a more confident reform-oriented leadership. The releases came through presidential pardon, indicative of a stronger embrace of the rule of law and civilian authority. Previous decisions were approved by the National Defence and Security Council. But in this latest move, the President used Act 401(1) of the new Constitution, marking the shift of power away from the military towards more civilian processes.

The noticeable absence of military endorsement of the releases simultaneously signals it is distancing itself from politics. Since the 2010 transfer of power, the Commander-in-Chief, General Min Aung Hlaing, has articulated that his focus is on building a professional armed

force. While the lines between the civilian and military authorities are still grey, given the fact that most of the senior civilian officials come from the military, the diffusion of powers among different civilian and military actors is encouraging.

These changes came immediately after the historic agreement signed between the Karen National Union and the government. The KNU was the only ethnic group not to have signed a ceasefire agreement, so this pact is a bold move towards national reconciliation after decades of fighting. The recent negotiations show that the government is seeking political solutions rather than sending in troops. The willingness to engage in dialogue and compromise is an important step forward.

While we are seeing a genuine movement towards political openness in Myanmar, we're not there yet. Last week's developments were important hurdles that needed to be crossed, to reach out across the opposition and do so in a manner that legitimises the rule of law and civilian authority.

Yet, there remains much more to be done, and it will not be easy. To transform a system from the inside after nearly 50 years of authoritarian rule is difficult. Among the powerful elites, there is resistance to change, and understandable mistrust in society. Optimism must be tempered with an appreciation of the reality of how hard it is to bring about change to a system closed for so long.

There are further hurdles to cross. More engagement is necessary with ethnic minorities, as there remains deep mistrust. Relations are particularly tense in Kachin state, where the Myanmar armed forces and Kachin Independence Army continue to square off.

Tensions simmer in other parts of the country as well, from the Wa territory to Shan state. Fighting is still part of the landscape. Not to be forgotten are the remaining political prisoners; many of them may lack the prominence of those recently released but have played important roles in standing up to earlier abuses of power. Other serious challenges remain - from building political institutions and policy delivery to basic economic reforms. It is comparatively easier to sign an agreement or release prisoners than to build trust and keep promises, especially in a society that has endured years of unfulfilled hope.

This openness will need to deepen and broaden. President Thein Sein has shown that he is willing to deliver, to meet the conditions of the West to remove sanctions. The US response to restore diplomatic relations is positive, but will need to go further. Now more than ever the international community needs to reciprocate with substantive support, and move Myanmar further along the road to democracy.

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Teheran's behaviour explained

BY RAY TAKEYH

THE perennial conflict between Iran and the West has entered a dangerous new phase, with tensions rising in the Persian Gulf since Iran threatened retaliation for last week's assassination of a chemical engineer linked to the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.

What accounts for Iran's behaviour? Behind all the sound and fury, Teheran is diligently pursuing a three-track policy that involves provocation of the international community and making noises about diplomacy as it relentlessly marches towards the bomb.

In recent months, the Islamic republic has engaged in conduct that has confounded even its most seasoned observers.

Shortly after a critical International Atomic Energy Agency report published in November was followed by threats of sanctions by the European Union, Basij militia masquerading as students stormed the British embassy in Teheran.

Washington's recent attempt to restrict Iran's oil trade by sanctioning its central bank prompted Teheran's threat to destabilise the global economy by closing the Strait of Hormuz, a waterway through which a sixth of the world's oil passes.

Such bellicose actions are a departure for a regime that has long exercised a modicum of restraint in its belligerence.

Indeed, such behaviour makes sense only if we appreciate that Iran sees itself as locked in conflict with the West and is determined to respond to recent escalations in US policy with escalations of its own. Armed forces deputy chief of staff Masud Jazayeri said last month that new guidelines for the armed forces from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei included this: "From now on, we will make threats against threats."

Iran hopes that its unsettling conduct will prompt Russia, China and members of the non-aligned community who fear war to defy US efforts to tighten sanctions.

The second track of Iran's strategy involves signalling its willingness to resume negotiations with the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany.

It is important that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons has always involved negotiations. A diplomatic path that is sporadic yet protracted can provide an umbrella under which Teheran advances its nuclear programme. It is no coincidence that Iran has timed its latest diplomatic gesture with the intensification of its nuclear activities. By threatening the disruption of global oil supplies yet dangling the prospect of entering talks, Iran can press actors such as Russia and China to be more accommodating in an effort to avoid a crisis that they fear. Any concessions that Iran may make at the negotiating table are bound to be symbolic and reversible.

Beneath all its bluster and threats, Iran is limiting itself to incremental gains in its nuclear programme. The Ayatollah has always sought to expand Iran's nuclear capabilities systematically but cautiously. Teheran calibrates to acclimatise the international community to its sequential gains. Consider that, today, Iran is steadily enriching uranium, a position widely considered unacceptable in 2005. Iran is ratcheting up its enrichment activities and is moving its most sensitive technologies to a facility near Qom better able to withstand military attack. Such conduct was once viewed as a provocation.

The Islamic republic is also working on a new generation of centrifuges that operate with speed and efficiency. Given that a limited number of such machines are required for enriching large quantities of uranium, Iran can begin housing its nuclear facilities in small installations that will prove difficult to detect.

By gradually yet relentlessly expanding its capabilities, Iran has succeeded in breaching Western red lines while avoiding the type of crisis that could outright endanger its nuclear programme, if not its regime.

In any confrontation with the West, Iran remains the weaker party. But an inordinately tense situation can provoke accidental conflicts and mishaps. Weaker parties can act impetuously and irresponsibly. All this does not suggest that the international community should ease pressure on Iran or condone its aggressive behaviour. But it does suggest eschewing conduct that further inflames the situation.

It is impossible to determine who killed Iranian scientist Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, but such actions are self-defeating in the sense that they do little to slow Iran's nuclear programme and play into the regime's hands as it seeks to fracture the international community.

The best means of holding the coalition together is to stress that it is Iran's behaviour that remains outside the parameters of legality so long as Teheran continues to enrich uranium in defiance of UN resolutions and threatens to imperil peaceful maritime traffic. Any action that distracts attention from Iran's illegal behaviour only retards the efforts to disarm the Islamic republic.

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LOS ANGELES TIMES-WASHINGTON POST

Thwarting an invasion in another era



BY JOHN MCBETH SENIOR WRITER

AS A young boy, I used to watch enthralled as former Battle of Britain pilots in ancient De Havilland Tiger Moths pulled unbelievable stunts spreading fertiliser across some of the more inaccessible corners of our dairy farm.

Given my life-long interest in military history, it should be no surprise then that six decades later I finally found myself at Biggin Hill, the legendary World War II fighter base in southern England's rolling downs I had read so much about as a child.

Developed in New Zealand in the late 1940s, top-dressing - or scattering phosphate and other fertilisers from the air - quickly attracted former air force pilots who bought their own surplus Tiger Moths and installed a hopper in the front seat.

Some of those same airmen had been based at Biggin Hill and other airfields across Britain in the epic struggle of the skies between July and October 1940 to gain ascendancy and forestall German invasion forces poised along the French coast.

My American friends wouldn't have had a war to win if pilots from Britain, Poland, New Zealand, Czechoslovakia, Australia, Belgium, South Africa and six other nations had not prevailed in those desperate months after the British Army's miracle retreat from Dunkirk.

"Never in the field of human conflict have so many owed so much to so few," famously proclaimed the talismanic Winston Churchill, whose stately pri-



A replica of a Supermarine Spitfire at the entrance to Biggin Hill's St George Chapel of Remembrance. ST PHOTO: JOHN MCBETH

vate home, Chartwell, is not far from Biggin Hill in the Kentish countryside.

Indeed, if the Germans had succeeded in storming ashore in England, the world would have been a very different place, with the United States and its allies either unwilling or unable to launch a counterstrike from the sea.

Lying on a gentle rise in Bromley, in the south-east outskirts of London, Biggin Hill passed out of Royal Air Force (RAF) hands in 1992, but the single runway on what came to be known as The Hump is still used by corporate jets and private flying clubs.

The sprawling old base is now a business park and an aviation industrial estate, where F1 motor-racing supremo Bernie Ecclestone keeps his prized - and closed - collection of vintage cars in a cluster of old brick barracks.

The RAF fielded 68 squadrons in the Battle of Britain, 35 of them flying Hawker Hurricanes and 19 equipped with Supermarine Spitfires, the two fighters that turned the tide against the Germans in dogfights over the English Channel and the south-east counties.

Fifty-two of those squadrons were based at various times at Biggin Hill, which was first established as part of the inner patrol zone of the London air-defence area in the later stages of World War I.

German bombers attacked Biggin Hill 12 times between August 1940 and January 1941, causing heavy damage to the runway and hangars. But while the station was reduced to a single squadron at one point, it remained operational throughout the battle.

Following the 1944 Normandy landings, Kent also became the target of 3,000 pilotless V1 flying bombs - the ultimate terror weapon and forerunner to today's cruise missile - which killed 6,184 people and wounded another 17,981, most of them civilians.

The pace of frontline fighting at Biggin Hill and its sector stations of Lympne, Hawkinge, Gravesend, Red Hill, Gatwick and West Malling was so hectic, squadrons had to be periodically moved to other parts of England to give the aircrews a rest.

Perhaps its best known pilot, who later commanded the station in 1943, was South African-born Group Captain Adolf "Sailor" Malan, the RAF's top air ace who shot down 27 enemy aircraft and shared in the destruction of seven more.

Serving under No. 11 Group commander Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park, one of New Zealand's most decorated sons, Group Captain Malan drew up 10 rules for air combat, the first of which was "wait until you see the whites of their eyes" before opening fire.

Over the space of four years, the Biggin Hill pilots, some as young as 19, won 200 awards for gallantry and destroyed 1,600 Luftwaffe fighters and bombers. While Biggin Hill's St George Chapel of Remembrance may not be on London's traditional tourist trail, its 12 stained windows and gold-embossed roll call of the 454 aircrew who died during the war still attract a surprising stream of foreign visitors.

Outside, flanking each side of the gate, are replicas of a Hurricane and a Spitfire. Five Spitfires, including the sole survivor from the battle itself, and two Hurricanes are part of the RAF's Battle of Britain Memorial Flight which still performs fly-bys on ceremonial occasions.

Many tourists, including Russians and Chinese, come from countries that never played a role in the air war over England. "I used to be surprised about who knew about this place, but not any more," says Laurie Chester, the chapel's custodian for the past 14 years.

While no Asians took part in the Battle of Britain, 18 Indian pilots were commissioned into the RAF in 1940, among them Squadron Leader Mahinder Singh Pujji, a Hurricane ace and the last survivor of the group when he died at 90 in late 2010.

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