

BURMA**Peking comfort for rebels***By Frank Hennessy*

Rangoon: The Peking-backed Burmese Communist Party (BCP) appears poised to launch a major new military offensive against the Government of President Ne Win, little more than a month after the conclusion of a State visit to Burma by Chinese Vice-Premier Teng Hsiao-ping. Knowledgeable sources here report that BCP units are expected to move shortly against two of the most strategically-placed towns in northeastern Burma, Kunlong and Hsenwi.

Kunlong, located on the west bank of the Salween River, was the scene of heavy fighting towards the end of last year between the communists and government troops. Hsenwi, 50 miles further west, is only 30 miles from the region's most important city, Lashio. The sources believe the offensive, which is expected to begin within the next month, is designed to give the BCP its

*Ne Win: Empty-handed.*

first secure foothold west of the Salween.

Although the insurgents have gained control of virtually all the territory from the river's eastern bank to the Chinese border, they have not yet established an operational presence on its western side. "What the BCP is trying to do," according to one analyst, "is to set up a base west of the Salween which it can use as a stepping-off point for operations into the Irrawaddy River plain, the heartland of the country, where 75% of Burma's 30 million people live."

Reports of the step-up in BCP activity come as analysts try to assess the impact of Teng Hsiao-ping's visit to Burma

at the end of January. It has been widely speculated that President Ne Win used the occasion to press the Chinese leader to curtail Peking's support for the BCP in the name of Sino-Burmese friendship. But the consensus of observers in Rangoon is that Teng gave nothing away during his six days of talks with Ne Win.

"Ne Win thought he had established a good personal relationship with Teng in 1974-75," said one diplomat, "and that with the purge of the 'gang of four' and Teng's rehabilitation the Chinese would reduce their support for the BCP. But Ne Win's lobbying with the Chinese has had no visible effect." The Chinese have justified their support for the BCP on the ground that it is a matter between the communist parties of China and Burma, and does not affect government-to-government relations between Peking and Rangoon.

Observers here describe Teng's visit as "just going through the motions," and they say there is no evidence to indicate that China plans to cut back on its assistance to the BCP. That aid has included rifles, 16 mm mortars, hand grenades and machine-guns, medical and financial support, and the use of sanctuaries on the Chinese side of the border. This view was reinforced by a statement from the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party issued in the wake of Teng's trip which accused unnamed countries of encouraging and abetting rebel groups without regard for bilateral relations based on friendship — a criticism clearly aimed at China.

China's reluctance to curtail its backing for Burmese communists appears to stem from several factors. The most important is that China's continuing influence with the BCP gives Peking additional leverage to ensure that Ne Win does not move Burma closer to the Soviet Union. "If Rangoon even looked to the USSR," said one diplomat, "Peking would just feed the BCP." Analysts also believe that China does not want to commit itself too strongly to Ne Win, who is 67 and known to be in ill-health. Should anything happen to the President, with no charismatic successor waiting in the wings, Burma's fragile political balance would be shattered. The BCP, one of the largest (10,000-15,000 men) and best organized insurgencies in Southeast Asia, could well emerge from the ensuing political chaos as a strong contender for power.

In addition, any major cutback in Chinese aid to the insurgents might prompt Moscow to fill the vacuum, creating a situation where the rebel groups would be operating with Soviet assistance along the Chinese border. Finally, due to its geo-political location, Burma is virtually compelled to have close relations with China, whatever policies Peking chooses to follow.

BANGLADESH**Zia plays the party game***By Daud Majlis*

Dacca: President Ziaur Rahman has decided to launch a political party, the Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Gonotantri Dal (Bangladesh Nationalist Democratic Party [BNDP]), as the forerunner of a grouping expected to emerge from talks with other political parties. The party and the front are steps towards replacing military rule with the normal political process.

As party leader, Zia expects to be the nation's president, but the general who turned ruler after the succession of coups arising from the chaos following Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination may keep his army power-base. Since last May's referendum the army is not Zia's only base, but his role as Chief of Army Staff indicates the continuing importance of the army.

Major changes have been effected in the army's top echelon in the past three

*Zia: Party spirit.*

months. A former head of the Bangladesh Rifles, Major-General Dastgir, has been retired while two generals reported to be close to Zia have been re-assigned from Dacca to head the Jessore and Chittagong garrisons.

Indications of the Government's thinking on constitutional changes are available from Jamaluddin Ahmad, a member of the President's Council of Advisers. In a recent speech he mentioned that the Government was considering the adoption of a French-type constitution with a directly-elected president, a prime minister, Cabinet ministers and an elected parliament. The question is whether a role for the army would be in-