

## Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION

Rangoon is, during even normal times, a city of swirling rumours and wild speculation. The opacity of the regime's decision making, rare public forays and pronouncements by the SPDC's top generals, and extreme censorship all combine to create a void of factual information perhaps like no other country in the region. The result is incessant, and highly inconsistent, guesswork among local observers and Burmese citizens on the latest machinations of the secretive regime, often fuelled by international radio services (especially the Democratic Voice of Burma and Radio Free Asia) that frequently broadcast unconfirmed street rumours.

“Is the Burmese Regime Coming Unglued?”

Cable from the US Embassy, Rangoon, 28 January 2005<sup>1</sup>

In 2003, Myanmar was described by the United States (US) Council on Foreign Relations as “one of the most tightly controlled dictatorships in the world”.<sup>2</sup> A number of factors contributed to this judgement, but the most obvious was the “pervasive intelligence apparatus” that had underpinned the ability of the armed forces (known as the *Tatmadaw*) to maintain a firm grip on the country for the previous forty years.<sup>3</sup> During this time, however, the intelligence system had evolved, changing not only in size and shape but also in its reach and influence. For the previous twenty years, it had been under the command of one man who, more than anyone else, was responsible for its development, power and impact on Myanmar society.

In 1983, after an extensive purge of its personnel, Myanmar's intelligence system had, in the words of a later president, "collapsed entirely".<sup>4</sup> One apparent result was that, in October that year, a team of three North Korean agents was able secretly to enter the country and stage a bomb attack in Yangon (then known as Rangoon) against the visiting South Korean president.<sup>5</sup> This incident deeply shocked and angered paramount leader General Ne Win, who decided to revamp the country's internal security agencies. He recalled the then relatively unknown Colonel Khin Nyunt from a posting to 44 Light Infantry Division (LID) and on 30 December 1983 appointed him Chief of Intelligence (CI).<sup>6</sup> Under Khin Nyunt's direction, the national intelligence apparatus was steadily rebuilt. Over the next two decades, it expanded in size, developed new capabilities and created new systems to manage information flows. As time passed, it extended its reach well beyond its traditional roles to embrace a wide range of important policy functions. In 1997, Thailand's National Security Council was told that Myanmar was spending 20 to 30 per cent of its "military development" budget on intelligence.<sup>7</sup>

Inside Myanmar, the military element of this apparatus collected and analysed strategic, operational and tactical intelligence. Assisted by a number of civilian agencies and investigative units, it rooted out dissidents in the public service and security forces, and conducted counter-espionage operations against suspected foreign agents.<sup>8</sup> Diplomatic missions were closely watched.<sup>9</sup> The civil population was monitored through an extensive and multi-faceted surveillance network, consisting of both professional agents and unpaid informers.<sup>10</sup> Agencies routinely intercepted radio traffic, listened to domestic and overseas telephone calls, recorded private conversations and opened mail.<sup>11</sup> From the mid-1990s, they kept a watchful eye

on computer activity in Myanmar, monitored email and social media accounts, and engaged in information warfare. As far as their resources allowed, a few agencies exploited aerial photography of different kinds and, after it became available and affordable, commercial satellite imagery.<sup>12</sup>

Outside Myanmar, the government maintained a string of spies and informers, mainly in neighbouring countries.<sup>13</sup> Together with the diplomats and defence staff posted to Myanmar's embassies, agents and regime sympathizers reported on the activities of ethnic insurgents, black marketeers, narcotics and people traffickers, refugees and expatriates, including political activists and exile communities.<sup>14</sup> They also kept an eye on military developments in border areas that might affect Myanmar's security. The activities of international organizations like the United Nations (UN) and non-government organizations (NGOs) with an interest in Myanmar were monitored, as were the activities of selected foreign academics and journalists. A blacklist was maintained, identifying thousands of so-called "enemies of the state". The names of both foreigners and Myanmar citizens were included, ranging from genuine activists to people who had simply been critical of the regime.<sup>15</sup> At different levels, and in different ways, liaison relationships were developed with counterpart intelligence agencies in South Asia, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>16</sup> There were also reported to be cooperative links with the security services of friendly countries, like Israel.<sup>17</sup>

As Myanmar's intelligence apparatus grew, so did its reputation. By the early 1990s, an experienced Myanmar-watcher could compare it to other official organizations in the country, and pronounce it "highly efficient".<sup>18</sup> A Thai observer described it in 1994 as "one of Asia's most efficient secret police forces".<sup>19</sup> In 1997, another went even further, calling Myanmar's "military

intelligence network” the “fourth most efficient in the world”, employing techniques used by services like Israel’s *Mossad*, the United Kingdom’s (UK) Secret Intelligence Service (known as MI6), the US’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Soviet Union’s KGB.<sup>20</sup> This kind of hyperbole, added to the sensational stories that constantly circulated inside the country, helped give Myanmar’s military intelligence organization (known to everyone as “the MI”) a cachet that it did not always deserve. However, it remained the case that intelligence was one of the most powerful weapons in the military government’s arsenal, helping to perpetuate its rule by crushing its opponents and performing a wide range of other functions.

By 2003, the intelligence apparatus was being described by both local and foreign observers as “an invisible government”, a “state within the state”.<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

1. “Is the Burmese Regime Coming Unglued?”, Cable from the US Embassy, Rangoon, 28 January 2005, *Public Library of US Diplomacy*, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05RANGOON121\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05RANGOON121_a.html).
2. Mathea Falco, *Burma: Time for a Change: Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2003), p. 1.
3. *Burma/Myanmar: How Strong is the Military Regime?*, Asia Report No. 11 (Bangkok/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 21 December 2000), pp. 11–12, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/28311/011\\_myanmar\\_military\\_regime.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/28311/011_myanmar_military_regime.pdf).
4. Maung Maung, *The 1988 Uprising in Burma*, Monograph No. 49 (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1999), p. 183.
5. Robert Trumbull, “A Political Purge May Have Led to Burma Security Lapses in Blast”, *The New York Times*, 14 October 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/14/world/a-political-purge-may->

have-led-to-burma-security-lapses-in-blast.html. See also Andrew Selth, "The Rangoon Bombing: A Historical Footnote", *The Interpreter*, 16 May 2012, <https://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/rangoon-bombing-historical-footnote>.

6. Khin Nyunt, *I, the Military Intelligence, SLORC and SPDC* (Yangon: Daw Maw Maw, 2017) (in Burmese), unofficial translation in the author's possession. General Tha Kha was initially appointed to the CI position but was dropped in favour of Khin Nyunt following the North Korean attack on President Chun Doo Hwan. See Robert H. Taylor, "'One Day, One Fathom, Bagan Won't Move': On the Myanmar Road to a Constitution", in *Myanmar's Long Road to National Reconciliation*, edited by Trevor Wilson (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 27, note 30.
7. The claim was made by Lieutenant General Thanom Watcharaphut, commander of the Third Army Region, which includes northern and northwestern Thailand. It is not clear what he meant by Myanmar's "military development" budget, but in any case his estimate seems rather high. See Ekkarat Banleng, "Burma – 007 Spies on Thai Soil", *Bangkok Phuchatkan*, 3 March 1998 (in Thai), <http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199803/msg00146.html>. Mac McClelland has written that the general was "speculating" about the funds allocated to intelligence as a proportion of Myanmar's entire defence budget, but this is highly unlikely. Mac McClelland, *For Us Surrender is Out of the Question: A Story from Burma's Never-ending War* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2010), p. 163.
8. For example, according to Mary Callahan, in 1998 "three of the 23 DDSI intelligence detachments are responsible for surveillance of army, navy and air force personnel". Mary P. Callahan, "Junta Dreams or Nightmares? Observations of Burma's Military since 1988", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 31, no. 3 (1999): 56.
9. See, for example, Kyi Win Sein, *Me and the Generals of the Revolutionary Council: Memoirs of Turbulent Times in Myanmar* (Whitley Bay: Consilience Media, 2015), p. 488.

10. The US Government believed that, as early as 1973, DDSI “has plain clothes operations in every city and village”. See US Army Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM), “Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI) Influence in Burma”, 12 January 1973, released to the author under the Freedom of Information Act by the Defence Intelligence Agency, Washington D.C., 3 December 2003.
11. One knowledgeable observer wrote in 1996 that “telephone tapping by military intelligence is a major industry in Burma”. Derek Brooke-Wavell, “Obituary: Leo Nichols”, *The Independent*, 26 June 1996, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituaries/leo-nichols-1338889.html>. See also Pyinsa Yupa, “Surveillance of mail in Myanmar”, April 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050319090437/http://www.bilston73.freeseerve.co.uk/surveillance/surveill.htm>.
12. On at least one occasion, Myanmar’s lack of a developed imagery intelligence (IMINT) capability forced it to turn to China for help, to the extent of permitting a People’s Liberation Army Air Force surveillance aircraft to photograph the entire Myanmar-India border. See Bahukutumbi Raman, *The Kaoboy of R&AW: Down Memory Lane* (New Delhi: Lancer Publications, 2007), pp. 18–19.
13. The number of agents sent abroad by Myanmar is unknown, and in any case must fluctuate, but in the late 1990s the Thai government was convinced that there were “thousands of MIS spies” in Thailand, scattered all around the country, in many different guises. See, for example, Ekkarat Banleng, “Burma – 007 Spies on Thai Soil”.
14. One former Myanmar ambassador suggested to the author that the intelligence agencies did not need to infiltrate most expatriate communities, as there was always plenty of people prepared to act as unpaid informers, either out of “a sense of patriotism” or with a view to securing some personal advantage. Interview, Canberra, October 2013. See also Julien Moe, “The Military Elite Class: Embassies, Agents, Moles and Informers”, *Online Burma Library*, 30 June 1999, <http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199906/msg00633.html>.

15. Some of those listed may have constituted a genuine threat to the regime, but many cannot have posed any real danger. Most people seem to have been denied visas to enter Myanmar simply because they had been critical of the military government. The list contained many errors.
16. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, "Velvet Glove", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 May 1998, p. 19; and Aung Zaw, "Et Tu, General?", *The Irrawaddy*, 21 July 2011, [http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=21735&page=1](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=21735&page=1).
17. Andrew Selth, *Burma's Secret Military Partners*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 136 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 2000), pp. 51–52.
18. Bertil Lintner, "Myanmar's Military Intelligence", *International Defence Review*, January 1991, p. 39.
19. "Spy Master's Rise to Power", *The Nation*, 2 September 1994, <http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199409/msg00003.html>.
20. Ekkarat Banleng, "Burma – 007 Spies on Thai Soil".
21. See, for example, Donald M. Seekins, "Burma in 1998: Little to Celebrate", *Asian Survey* 39, no. 1 (1999): 13; and Aung Zaw, "Khin Nyunt: Maybe Insein's the Right Place", *The Irrawaddy*, 13 June 2005, [http://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion\\_story.php?art\\_id=4710](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=4710).