

11th March 1975

Sr Thomas Brimelow, GCMG.
Foreign & Commonwealth Office,
Whitehall, S.W.1.

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Dear Tom,

I enclose a paper which has been sent to me from New York by Sao Ying Sita Hseng Lao of Yawnghwe about the unhappy events in Burma when the body of U Thant was brought home. As the Department will find the story is far grimmer than was reported at the time though it may well be that Terence O'Brien will have been able to give you comparable detail.

Obviously the purpose of sending this account is the desire of Ying Sita Hseng Lao to get me to do something to get this fuller version known publicly. There are considerable difficulties about this. I can think, from my personal point of view, of two of them right away. First, Ying is the daughter of the Mahadevi of Yawnghwe a distinguished Shan lady married to the first president of Independent Burma. When I was in Burma Mahadevi made it quite clear that she expected the British to abet the Shan's in their desire for independence from the Burmese. I naturally told her that this was not possible. Indeed although the Shans had plenty of grievances against the Burmese, the splitting up of Burma would obviously be destructive and foolish. No doubt there is something of the Mahadevi's original thinking behind this operation.

Secondly, the person who ought to know about this is MOUNTBATTEN. But here again there are difficulties because if MOUNTBATTEN got this paper he would probably tell Ne Win that he got it from me and given my attitude towards the Ne Win's regime this would both depreciate the value of the paper and again would probably do no good.

So I really send it to you as something I have received from this particular person and something which is probably true not only in substance but also in detail. For these reasons I would certainly like the story to be better known not only in any hostility to the present regime but also in loyalty to the memory of U Thant.

Meantime, I have sent an acknowledgement to Ying Sita Hseng Lao of a totally dead pan kind which simply tells her that I have received the document but says no more. A copy incidentally has been sent to Suu Kyi, Aung San's daughter, who is now Mrs. Michael Aris.

I am sorry to send you a letter full of so many "hedgies" but I thought the department better know the surrounding circumstances.

Yours ever,

Paul Gowling

P.S. Since writing the above I have talked to Suu Kyi. She takes a characteristic Burmese anti-Shan line that these demonstrations were contrived by Shan influences and that there were inexcusable because they had no hope of succeeding and simply cost human lives. This accords with my own assessment that the sending of these accounts has a direct political motive and Suu Kyi was not prepared to concede that there might have been something spontaneous about the whole thing.

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Given this, I think, I would take issue with her though I cannot pretend to know what proportions of the affair were due to political motives on the one hand and spontaneous indignations on the other. But no doubt information from the embassy in Rangoon will give you some guidance on this point.

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1 April 1975

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Dear Paul,

I read with interest your letter of 11 March about the events surrounding the funeral of U Thant. There can be no doubt that the attitude of the Burmese authorities was small-minded, shabby, and deeply resented by a large number of educated Burmese, especially students and priests.

As so often in this sort of episode, two totally different versions of what actually happened have been circulating. According to the initial official version, nobody was killed during the rioting. It fairly quickly became apparent that this was just not so, and the authorities later admitted that 9 people had been killed. I have no doubt that even this was an under-estimate; but as you know, the Burmese authorities go to considerable lengths to prevent foreign diplomats and other outsiders from looking below the surface of Burmese life, and it has been impossible to discover just how many lives were lost. Terence O'Brien sent us at the time a copy of an anonymous letter which claimed that at least 26 students were deliberately killed by the army; the documents you enclosed

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give a similar account of events, but speak of thousands having been killed.

Your documents make distressing reading, and have the imprint of genuine indignation about them. For all that, I doubt whether their authors are being totally objective. One can, as you say, imagine various political motives for their action. I would therefore frankly prefer not to involve the Office in the business of giving wider currency to these documents. But I am very grateful to you for having brought them to our attention.

*Yours ever,
Tom*

Thomas Brimelow