

# The bomb explosion in Rangoon—*cui bono?*

by Ramtanu Maitra in New Delhi

The Oct. 9 bomb explosion in Rangoon that killed 15 South Korean officials who were accompanying President Chun Doo Hwan is yet another sign that the world is veering toward war.

By all counts, the Rangoon bomb explosion was unique. In recent history, one can remember no such murderous attacks ever unleashed against a visiting head of state and his cabinet ministers. Although four key Seoul ministers were killed, it is clear that the real target was President Chun himself.

The South Korean government has accused the North Koreans of committing this barbarous act, calling it a “declaration of war.” Following the attempt, the Burmese authorities, who need to do a lot of explaining, arrested Korean terrorists in Burma who appeared to be involved in the atrocity. There are also reports that a ship carrying North Koreans arrived in Sri Lanka a few days before Oct. 9 and left abruptly when the Sri Lankan authorities began to inquire as to what had prompted their unannounced arrival at the island.

Pawprints have thus already been found, and judging the rapidity with which the apparent culprits are being located, the blame for the macabre killings is likely to fall on the Kim il-Sung regime. It is also clear that the North Korean administration will be only too happy to take the responsibility for the brutal massacre.

The key question is how the North Koreans, who are easily recognizable aliens in Burma, could install the bomb in the ceiling of the mausoleum? According to one newspaper report, the shrine is guarded 24 hours a day by Burmese troops, and the Burmese security officials responsible had assured the South Korean entourage that the mausoleum had passed a thorough security check. It is therefore impossible for the terrorists to have placed the bomb there without the tacit approval of some section of the Burmese security apparatus. Burmese officials have ruled out any possibility of involvement of Burmese political dissidents in the incident, since no high-level Burmese official was scheduled to be present at the mausoleum ceremony. One foreign diplomat in Rangoon has also discounted involvement of the Peking-

backed Burmese Communist Party, unless Peking had approved of the act beforehand.

The possibility that Burmese security officials were involved in the plot leads to questions of strategic significance. It is one matter to allow a killer to break through the cordon and shoot at the target; it is a matter of much graver consequence when a government, or at least a powerful section of the government, is aware of a plot to wipe out an entire foreign government leadership and permits the plan to succeed. The Burmese government had earlier shown intense interest in enhancing trade and economic relations with South Korea, and had meanwhile had little contact with the North Koreans. However, Burma can hardly be called a nation; the government effectively controls less than 30 percent of its geographic territory. All large powers have their own well-nourished political networks functioning in the country. As the superpower tensions increased, it was not unlikely that Burma was picked as the point at which to deliver a message.

To date, the Chinese foreign ministry has issued a statement on the atrocity which says: “We are very concerned about the result of the investigation into the explosion incident.” In contrast, the Soviet Union, which has no diplomatic relations with South Korea, has reacted with the same tone it mustered in the aftermath of its shooting down of the KAL 007 airliner in September. The TASS report on the bombing placed Chun’s title of president within quotation marks, and he was referred to as the head of the “Seoul regime.”

As if to underline their approval of the Rangoon atrocity, Soviet military fighters were sent to violate Japanese air space two days after the Burma explosion, just as they did immediately after the downing of the KAL 007. Korea is the front line for Japan against the Soviet Union, and the Soviet government daily *Isvestia* on Oct. 11 takes careful note of the presence of Japanese officials in the recent annual joint American-South Korean military maneuvers, stating that this causes a “dangerous new stage in the escalation of military tension in the Pacific and Far East region.”

However, Chun has carried out a foreign policy over the past year and a half that has not only ired Moscow, but also

the U.S. State Department. Contrary to the impressions held by many Asians, in very many matters South Korea does not toe the U.S. policy line. Embattled in its relationship with Peking-backed North Korea and located in close proximity to the Soviet Union, Seoul requires U.S. aid for its security, but resents U.S. meddling in its internal affairs. The State Department, however, does not expect South Korea to act independently in its own interests. It is also a well-established fact that the Carter administration in 1979 was implicitly involved in orchestrating the assassination of the then-Korean President Park Chung Hee, whose firm leadership throughout the 1960s and 1970s had turned Korea from an impoverished into an industrial nation. Along with a better standard of living, this success provided the South Koreans with a deep sense of national identity which provoked the wrath of the Carter administration. It was common knowledge that after Park was killed, the assassin sought asylum in the U.S. embassy.

### **Chun's foreign policy initiatives**

President Chun, brought to power by the South Korean army following Park's death, picked up where Park had left off in spite of strong internal and external opposition. Soon Chun was facing a large-scale destabilization effort designed by the Carter administration's "human rights" advocates. In 1980, massive student demonstrations in Kwangju rocked the government, but Chun stood his ground and managed to survive and launch a new initiative in foreign policy.

Following the electoral victory of Ronald Reagan in November 1980, the U.S. administration temporarily abandoned the "human rights" weapon against Chun. The South Korean President became the first head of government to see President Reagan in Washington, and was apparently assured by Reagan that as long as South Korea remained a military ally of the United States, the Reagan administration would not interfere in its internal affairs. In the summer of 1982, President Chun, with a hefty entourage of economic experts, undertook a trip to the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia in order to enhance Korea's economic links to Southeast Asia.

Chun's trip, the first of its kind ever undertaken by a South Korean president, gave him a great deal of political mileage. Although economic matters took the front seat, Chun made it clear during the trip that he considered the Soviet Union a common threat to both ASEAN and South Korea. Chun's fear of Soviet expansionism was never a secret. During his visit to Washington in February 1981, he had stressed his view that the Sino-U.S. relationship had substantially removed the Chinese threat from the region, since China is a "friend of our friend," leaving the Soviets as the main danger in the area.

More importantly, Chun's economic agreements with the ASEAN nations were considered a major achievement. Chun was aware that over the last decade and a half, the Southeast

Asian countries have become increasingly vocal in their demands for high technology. Japan, which possesses these technologies, has resisted such demands. Thus, an anti-Japan lobby has been created within these nations that is stronger than that already existing for historical reasons—although Japan has some economic ties with the ASEAN nations. Chun took advantage of the region's continuing mistrust of China and Japan, offering an economic way out.

Chun's presence was welcomed by ASEAN. South Korea, a known ally of the United States, at the same time has no past record of military ambitions in the region and therefore is acceptable to the ASEAN. South Korea also possesses an impressive range of middle-level technologies, having developed very strong capabilities in the construction industry, shipbuilding, computers, electronics, and the finished steel industry. South Korea needs basic raw materials from its neighbors—though in much less quantity than Japan—and most importantly, has shown a willingness to part with their acquired technology.

The ASEAN trip bolstered Chun's own self-assurance and boosted the country's confidence. In spite of South Korea's economic problems—the country is strapped with large debt payments and a shortage of cash, which has slowed down the growth rate to a paltry 2.5 percent in 1981-82—Chun went on a trip to Africa seeking new friends and new markets in late 1981. Again the South Korean offer to the African nations—middle-level technology for new trade and business—met with success.

It is during this period that Chun started making efforts to solve relations with the U.S.S.R. and China. Although neither of these large powers recognized South Korea, there were indications that plans were afoot to begin changing the existing relations with the East bloc nations.

It is also significant that South Korea was seeking closer ties with India, whose prime minister is the chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement. In fact, the six-nation trip Chun had started in October and which was cut short in Rangoon was to be highlighted by the first-ever visit by a South Korean head of state to India, where productive discussion on economic bilateral issues and the role the non-aligned can play to diminish superpower tension was anticipated.

The totality of Chun's initiatives showed that he was becoming an Asian leader, and in the process was developing many important friends. To those who consider Chun an "illegitimate" leader, such a prospect must have been annoying, if not downright unacceptable.

It was likely that the Rangoon incident will put Chun back in his place—at least temporarily. His key ministers, those involved in the country's remarkable economic development, have been killed. Lee Bun Suk, the dynamic foreign minister who was trying to bring South Korea into an active role within the Non-Aligned Movement, is also dead and buried. One tends to assume that, bereft of his close associates, Chun will postpone his future plans and stay home.