

U Thant of the United Nations—

The Ex-Schoolteacher Who Meets

Not long ago he was a shy schoolmaster in the Burmese rice paddies; now he challenges world leaders on war-and-peace decisions

LAST YEAR, U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations, hurriedly left his 38th-floor office in the UN building in the midst of a war crisis between The Netherlands and Indonesia.

He had just received word that his only son, Tin Maung ("Tinny"), 21, had been killed in a bus mishap while vacationing in his native Rangoon, Burma. Now the Secretary-General returned to his New York City mansion facing the Hudson to console a deeply bereaved Madame Thant.

The next day he was conferring with special mediators on the Indonesian crisis, and when "Tinny's" funeral services were being held in Burma the Secretary-General was delivering an important address in Ottawa, characteristically admonishing both Russia and the United States for their "obsession with the past" which, he felt, jeopardized world peace.

Only a few months ago, Thant's voice, soft and placating during the shrillest of international arguments, trembled as he delivered the eulogy for his close friend, the late UN Undersecretary Omar Loutfi, whom Thant praised for "evenness of temper and political realism"—words which many use to describe Thant himself.

Then, visibly shaken, Thant left to unravel still another problem, the refusal of Russia and France to meet special financial obligations to the United Nations.

These two personal crises shed light on the veiled character of the

"little teacher" with timeless face and Buddha smile, who, in a relatively short time, has risen from schoolmaster in Burma's rice paddies to leader of a 110-nation organization. He is a man deeply concerned with people who has been thrust into a position in which he must remain aloof and "neutral." He is a reluctant officeholder whose success is at the mercy of East and West—yet one who unhesitatingly tells off both sides.

After the death of Dag Hammarskjöld in 1961, Thant was named acting Secretary-General to fill Dag's unexpired term. Russia objected to him as Dag's full-time successor because she wanted a three-man directorship. The U. S. had reservations because he "lacked forceful character." Thant was so unknown that some British Commonwealth delegates couldn't pronounce his name. (It's OO-THONT, the "U" being a Burmese cross between "mister" and "sir.") But Asians and Africans prevailed with their stop-gap candidate and hoped he'd win friends before 1963 when the UN elected a Secretary-General for a full term.

THANT'S IDEA of winning friends was to visit Moscow and tape a radio program telling the Russian people that their government was not giving them the full story on the Congo. He also took President Kennedy to task for resuming nuclear testing. When not scolding both sides impartially, Thant was eminently successful in cooling various world crises, most notably in the Congo. As the UN election approached, both sides seemed favorably disposed—then came the Cuban crisis of last October.



Under the UN charter, the power of the Secretary-General pretty much reflects the decisiveness of the man on the 38th floor. During the Cuban peril, Thant made the office a take-charge position. He blasted Khrushchev's arms smuggling; he deplored Kennedy's blockade. Eventually, he brought both sides together for talks and became an avenue through which each could back down without losing face.

When the Secretariat election came, Thant won more easily than expected. "Every time a serious crisis threatens world peace," said Anastas Mikoyan, Russian first deputy premier and firm *troika* advocate, "we shall turn to Secretary-General Thant, who has won confidence and support."

Cuban dealings provided two insights into the man behind the inscrutable countenance. Thant, a

nonabstemious Buddhist, enjoys an occasional Daiquiri cocktail (a favorite of President Kennedy, too). Once a reporter pointed to Thant's glass and asked, "Is that Cuban rum you're drinking?"

"Yes," Thant confessed with a sly smile, "but bought in the U. S."

Thant retains the Buddhist's respect for contemplation. During tense moments in the UN, he orders his aides to leave him while he meditates alone. He does so in strange surroundings for such an Oriental custom: he has never changed the chaste Scandinavian décor of Hammarskjöld's office; only a delicately worked silver bowl and cigarette box bring a touch of Asia to the austere room.

These withdrawn moments give Thant what he calls "emotional equilibrium," a characteristic he feels sadly lacking in the world.

World Crises By JACK RYAN



U Thant's family visits the UN: Mrs. Thant (r.), daughter Ayeaya, her husband Tin Myiant (far r.), and the Thants' late son, Tin Maung. At left, Thant holds press conference.

"The emotional qualities of man have been dominant for a long time. I think qualities like bitterness and intolerance and hysteria have been rampant all over the world. I am against all emotional . . . hysteria."

Thant has a temper, but only incompetence and stupidity can set it off. Last year when the Katangese tried to frame UN troops with a phoney massacre, Thant threw up his hands and cried out undiplomatically: "How can you work with a bunch of clowns like that?"

Thant differs from Hammarskjöld in temperament and work habits, if not in dedication. Dag was aesthetic and bombastic; Thant pragmatic and philosophical. The late Secretary-General ran a one-man show; Thant consults regularly with his assistant secretaries.

UNLIKE HAMMARSKJÖLD, who kept lights burning through the night, Thant is an eight-hour-a-day man whenever possible. He believes that in stepping away from his work he gets a better perspective on it. Thant leaves Villa Bella Vista, his 14-room residence in the Riverdale section, in a chauffeured limousine in time for his first order of business, reading cabled reports, at 10 a.m. each morning. Next come meetings with his staff; afternoon appointments are for visiting dignitaries, from Russian priests to Guinea's foreign minister.

Lunch is usually a business affair (a recent guest was the king of Morocco) in the dining room of Thant's personal suite adjoining his office. The suite also includes a bathroom, bedroom, conference room, and kitchen. Like Hammarskjöld, Thant only uses it for a quick wash and wardrobe change

enroute to formal evening affairs.

Around 6 p.m., Thant returns to his home. The UN owns the house and allows Thant \$5,000 to run it. He also receives \$27,500 in yearly salary and \$22,500 for expenses.

In the past, Madame Thant attended two or three major diplomatic functions a year, but since the death of her son she has become a virtual recluse. The Thants' most frequent visitor is their daughter, Ayeaya, 23, a recent Hunter College (New York) graduate in sociology, and her husband U Tin Myiant, an electronic-engineering student. Friends say his daughter has become "quite Americanized," unlike Thant himself, who, although impeccable in English dress and speech during business hours, has retained Burmese traditions during his six years in the U. S.

When he arrives home, Thant changes to a *longyi*, a long Burmese kilt. In discussing relaxation, Thant describes as "unfortunate" the fact that he never developed a taste for anything "light." He is an avid reader, but only in ponderous political history. "Throughout my life, I have had a passion for just serious reading," he says and then as an afterthought adds: "although at one time Sherlock Holmes was popular in Burma, and I liked Sherlock Holmes very much."

Sometimes Thant will hike a bit, but he is not much for the strenuous life. If a good boxing match is on television, however, he will be sure to tune it in.

Thant believes the way of life he was taught as a child in Burma could help the world find peace. Thant was the oldest of four sons (three are now in government; one is an editor) of a well-to-do family

in Pantanaw, a town of some 15,000 on the marshy Irrawaddy delta near Rangoon. He describes his father as a "lover of books," and Thant himself grew naturally into a passive, bookish youth.

"I was not fond of games," he recalls. "My hobby was just hiking and swimming. In those days one used to get up at 5:30 in the morning, do some hiking for 45 minutes or so, then swim." But the remainder of the day was devoted to reading and writing at home.

"MY SOLE ambition," Thant says, "has been to be a political journalist." He was at the University of Rangoon when his father died and he had to return home to assume duties as head of the family. When he returned to university life, he began to study teaching. In doing so, he met the man who shaped his future, U Nu.

U Nu was a young political radical, advocating freedom from British colonialism. Where Thant was a dispassionate observer, Nu was the energetic mover and shaker. Opposite as they were, the two students became friends and lifelong associates—and, imperceptibly at first, Thant was on his way from the scholar's ivory tower to the diplomats' glass-and-steel tower on the East River.

Burmese journalists claim that one of Thant's early roles was to act as a courier of love messages between Nu and the young girl he loved. When the couple's marriage plan was thwarted by their families, Thant arranged a river rendezvous and had a boat ready to carry them off on an elopement.

After those early years, Nu rushed into political battle, while

Thant retired to a quiet teaching job in Pantanaw. It was not until after World War II that Thant actively engaged in government. With freedom, Nu became Burma's prime minister and immediately appointed Thant head of the new nation's press relations.

Burmese politicians were inclined to be derisive of the "little teacher" at first. But when Thant reportedly got away with lighting one of his favorite black cheroots in the presence of Nu, a militant antitobacco and antiliquor crusader, they guessed the prime minister had a friend he needed badly. It proved so: Nu came to rely on Thant for speeches, confidences, and guidance. In 1957, he appointed Thant ambassador to the UN. Once again Thant's scholarly composure was mistaken for "lack of forcefulness"—but, once again, not for long.

RECENTLY Thant made some observations on the future of the world. He feels that the 1970s ("If there are '70s") will see four major powers astride the world rather than just Russia and the United States. Western Europe will be added along with China, which, he says, will explode an atomic device "possibly this year or next."

Thant feels the UN will then be a peacemaker only in brushfire wars which, if unchecked, might spread. But the world organization will not be able to awe the nuclear powers: they must learn to live among themselves, he says, and now is the moment for them to figure out how.

Can the world achieve stability? Thant replies only that he is "essentially an optimist." In the meantime, the little teacher calmly prepares to meet the next crisis.