

# Shwe Mann: Soon to be Burma's Top Gun?

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**There have been persistent but unconfirmed reports that Gen Thura Shwe Mann, 60, will take over the powerful position of commander in chief in the near future.**

Expectations were renewed after a major reshuffle in the armed forces last week. Several heads rolled within the bureaus of special operations and new regional commanders were appointed.

Speculation is rife that the junta leaders and their closest allies are already preparing for the 2010 election and beyond.

As for Than Shwe, he will not be stepping down just yet. However, he will be considering which of his two most trusted generals will ultimately succeed him as head of the armed forces—either Thura Shwe Mann or Lt-Gen Myint Swe.

Shwe Mann has been with Burma's defense ministry since 2001 and many of his peers believe he is being groomed to fill the top spot as commander in chief, a position currently held by Than Shwe.

At present, Shwe Mann is the No 3 man in the military hierarchy and holds the title of joint chief of staff. But reports suggest that senior army leaders who were former heads of the Bureau of Special Operations have resisted his command.

However, those around him tread carefully; Shwe Mann is considered to be one of Than Shwe's protégés.

Graduating from the Defense Services Academy's Intake 11 in 1969, Shwe Mann rose steadily through the ranks of the officers' corps, becoming a major in 1988. What involvement he had in the bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protestors that year remains unknown.

Shwe Mann earned the title "Thura," meaning "bravery," during offensive operations against the Karen National Liberation Army in 1989.

In 1991, he served as a tactical operations commander for Light Infantry Division (LID) 66, based in Prome, northern Bago Division.

By 1996, he had been promoted to brigadier-general and was appointed to oversee security in Rangoon as commander of the elite LID 11 based in Htauk Kyant, about 20 miles (32 km) west of the former capital.

One year later Shwe Mann got his big break. He was posted to Irrawaddy Division as commander of the Southwest Military Region as well as joining the fraternity as a de facto member of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Traditionally, most senior leaders, including Than Shwe, are posted in the delta before becoming head of the armed forces.

After serving three years in the delta, Shwe Mann was promoted to major-general and became a

permanent member of the SPDC. He was transferred to the defense ministry where he assumed the prestigious position of joint chief of staff, permitting him an oversight of all commanders from the army, navy and air force.

The following year, he was awarded the newly minted position of Tatmadaw Nyi Hnying Kutkae Yay Hmu or Coordinator of Special Operations, Army, Navy and Airforce, a lofty title, from where he could also keep an eye on the country's bureaus of special operations.

In 2003, Shwe Mann was awarded his fourth star, reaching the rank of general.

Interestingly, very little has been heard from or about him in Burma's official press since his attachment to the defense ministry.

Shwe Mann appears to shun the spotlight and rarely speaks in public. The one notable time he did make a public speech was when former premier Gen Khin Nyunt and his intelligence apparatus were purged from power in 2004.

*"In the military everybody is liable for their failure to abide by the law. Nobody is above the law,"* he told a gathering of businesspeople.

Burma's aging military leadership is constantly searching for a young and trustworthy young gun to lead the country once they relinquish power. And the choice will not be Vice Snr-Gen Maung Aye, the current No 2, who is reportedly out of favor with Than Shwe.

Maung Aye, currently army chief and simultaneously deputy commander in chief of the armed forces is senior to Shwe Mann and a power struggle seems inevitable.

Observers speculate about how much real authority Shwe Mann really has. He runs day-to-day military affairs in the Ministry of Defense, but is allegedly bypassing Maung Aye and reporting directly to Than Shwe. In any case, if Maung Aye opposes promotion, it is unlikely Shwe Mann will reach the top post anytime soon.

Shwe Mann has a reputation of being down to earth and seems to have earned considerable respect among Burma's foot soldiers, particularly those who served directly under his command.

He and his wife are also close to Than Shwe's family on a personal basis, flying together on occasion to Singapore for shopping trips.

Like most of Burma's top military leaders, Shwe Mann generally avoids talking about pro-democracy icon and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Some observers believe that he has specific reasons for avoiding the topic. He is certainly cautious not to attack her publicly.

In fact, Shwe Mann has not yet shown his hand with regard to a broad range of social, economic and political issues. His vision for Burma's future is quietly unclear.

He has been quoted as saying, however, that the country's future leaders must have in-depth knowledge in two specific areas—gems and rice.

This belief would appear to bear the hallmarks of self-interest though, as his family is involved in rice exporting, or at least they were before the cyclone struck.

Rumored to be taking steps to modernize Burma's antiquated rice mills to improve export production, Shwe Mann and his son, Aung Thet Mann, enjoy a close working relationship with junta business crony Tay Za.

Aung Thet Mann is a director at Ayer Shwe Wah, which in 2005 became the first private company to be allowed to export rice to Bangladesh and Singapore. The company is part of Tay Za's Htoo Trading Company and both companies and their directors are on the US sanctions list.

In 2000, the government presented Ayer Shwe Wah with more than 30,000 acres of wetlands and rice paddy in the Irrawaddy delta region. The company also received lucrative government contracts to supply fertilizers to farmers throughout the delta and is involved in construction projects in the new administrative capital, Naypyidaw.

During the early days of the cyclone crisis, the Shwe Mann camp leaked news that he supported more international cooperation, more aid and more UN assistance. However, he was apparently stonewalled by hardliners Than Shwe and Maung Aye.

As a leader, Shwe Mann would listen and look toward economic reform, some businessmen in Rangoon have said.

There's no doubt that if Shwe Mann rises to become commander in chief of the armed forces, many of his associates and Burmese businessmen would welcome the move. In fact, they are banking on him.

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