



At an Independence Day ceremony, Burmese dictator Than Shwe reiterates his promise of a general election this year, but does not specify a date.

Burma's military government chief, Snr-Gen Than Shwe, marked the 62nd anniversary of the country's independence from Britain in the capital Naypyidaw on Monday morning with a statement promising an election this year, but offered no date or timetable for a democratic process.

According to *Agence France-Presse* and other international news agencies, the outdoor ceremony was attended by government ministers, military officers and more than 1,000 civil servants.

"Plans are underway to hold elections in a systematic way this year," Than Shwe said. However, he warned Burmese people to "remain vigilant at all times against dangers posed by neocolonialists."

In what many observers understood to be a further warning, he said, "The entire population has to make the correct choice."

Political opposition parties in Burma and many analysts have denounced the scheduled election

as a sham designed to cement the ruling generals' grip over the country. More than 2,000 political prisoners remain behind bars in Burma, including pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi who is not expected to be released to contest the election.

Meanwhile, about 500 members of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party hosted diplomats, veteran politicians, ethnic leaders and supporters at an Independence Day party at the opposition's Rangoon's headquarters on Monday.

In a statement released on Monday, the NLD called for the immediate release of all political prisoners, including Suu Kyi, her deputy Tin Oo, members of the 88 Students Generation group, Buddhist monks and ethnic leaders such as U Khun Tun Oo , an elected parliamentarian and chairman of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy who in November 2005 was sentenced to 93 years in prison.

It also called on the Burmese junta to allow all political opposition offices in the country to open, something that was banned after the country's last election in 1990.

In his Independence Day speech, Thakhin Thein Pe, a 94-year-old veteran politician who fought alongside national leader Aung San for independence in the 1940s, said, "During the independence movement, our leaders devoted themselves to founding a country that has independence, democracy and peace. However, the country's socioeconomic situation is now totally destitute, because of the lack of national unity which can only be built through national reconciliation."

In a message to the people of Burma both inside the country and around the world on the occasion of Burma's Independence Day, the US government last week released a statement saying it hoped that Burmese people would soon be able to exercise their human rights freely.

"We support the peaceful efforts of people everywhere to exercise freely their universal human rights, and we look forward to the day when Burma's citizens will be able to do so. We hope that day will come soon," US State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said.

Burma gained its independence from Britain in 1948 and experimented with democracy until 1962, when the military first seized power.

The current regime emerged in 1988 after countrywide demonstrations for democracy. It held a general election in 1990 but refused to honor the results—a landslide victory for the pro-democracy NLD, led by Nobel laureate Suu Kyi.