

Stallholders who lost their businesses when Rangoon's Mingalar Market was destroyed by fire last month have been invited to apply for loans from the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), according to sources.

The market, located in Mingalar Taungnyunt Township, was one of Rangoon's largest until it burned to the ground on May 24. The cost in damages from the fire is expected to reach about 1 billion kyat (US \$1 million).

Vendors say that the USDP has recently begun distributing loan application forms to anyone affected by the fire. Applicants are also required to agree to 11 conditions, including one that stipulates that they acknowledge the loans are being “offered by the USDP out of sympathy for victims of the fire.”

The forms are addressed to Rangoon Mayor Brig-Gen Aung Thein Lin and the USDP, a junta-backed party formed on April 29 by the current prime minister, Gen Thein Sein, and 26 other ministers and senior regime officials. The party was recognized by the Election Commission on June 8.

“We think the loans are part of the USDP's campaign for this year's election, because the application forms are addressed to them,” said a drugstore owner who spoke to *The Irrawaddy* on Wednesday. “It's the USDP that's offering the loan, not the government.”

According to the Rangoon-based *Weekly Eleven Journal*, the loans will be disbursed by the state-run Yangon [Rangoon] City Development Committee (YCDC) Bank. It was not clear, however, if the USDP would be providing the funding for the loans or merely acting as a guarantor.

“The government and the USDP are becoming completely indistinguishable,” said Phyo Min Thein, the chairman of the Union Democratic Party (UDP). “I think there needs to be a clear distinction between the two.”

Under the Political Parties Registration Law Chapter, parties have no legal right to exist if they

are found to have “obtained and used directly or indirectly money, land, house, building, vehicle, property owned by the State.”

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