



Source: Thant, 1 July 1963, Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Netherlands, photographer Jacques de Nijs / Anefo

THANT, U

Burmese diplomat, second Acting Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) 1961-1962 and third Secretary-General 1962-1971

By **Bernard J. Firestone** · Version 21 October 2019

Was born 28 January 1909 in Pantanaw, Burma (now Myanmar) and died 25 November 1974 in New York City, United States. He was the son of U Po Hnit, landowner and rice merchant, and Daw Nan Thaung. On 14 November 1934 he married Daw Thein Tin, with whom he had a daughter, two sons and a foster son.

Pen name in Burma: Thilawa.

Biography

Thant was born in the Irrawaddy delta region in southwest Burma. His father was a landowner of comfortable means and a partner with Thant's great uncle in a rice mill established by Thant's paternal grandfather. His mother, a deeply religious woman, imbued Thant with a lifelong devotion to Buddhist spirituality and meditation. His father, the only person in Pantanaw who could read and write English, kindled in him an early interest in English literature. By the age of twelve Thant was reading works in English by authors such as William Shakespeare and Arthur Conan Doyle. Determined to pursue a career in journalism, he published the first of many English-language articles to appear in Burmese publications one year after he entered Pantanaw National High School. His father died in 1923 when Thant was fourteen. Because an avaricious relative swindled his mother out

of the anticipated family inheritance, Thant, the oldest of four brothers, was thrust into a position of family responsibility. Instead of completing a four-year degree at Rangoon University, Thant decided to pursue an intermediate, two-year degree that would qualify him for licensure as a teacher and allow him to support his brothers' higher education. After his examinations he returned to Pantanaw to teach in the local high school. He continued writing and won several competitions for translating English works into Burmese. In 1926 Thant entered Rangoon University, where he continued his studies in English literature and took courses in history and philosophy. He was active in extracurricular activities and wrote frequent letters to the press about a wide range of topics. He developed a close friendship with fellow student U Nu. In 1931 Thant achieved the highest score on the National Teachership Examination and was appointed headmaster. When a vacancy arose, he arranged for Nu to become school superintendent. When Nu returned to Rangoon to study law, Thant became superintendent. Thant retained connections with Rangoon through Nu and English bookshop owner John S. Furnivall, who had influenced his literary interest and introduced him to British Fabian socialism. In 1934 he married Daw Thein Tin, the only child of a prosperous attorney. They saw one of their two sons die in infancy.

Nationalist ferment against British colonialism was growing in Rangoon. In 1935 Burma's colonial occupier the United Kingdom (UK) enacted the Government of Burma Act, which separated Burma from India and introduced limited self-government. Nu and fellow student Aung San founded the Rangoon Student Union which, along with other nationalist groups, resisted continued British rule in any form. The outbreak of the Second World War aggravated British-Burmese relations as many nationalist leaders, including Nu, who refused to join the Allied side, were placed in jail. By May 1942 Burma fell to Japan. Nu was released from prison and San, who had fled to Japan, joined the Japanese in their conquest of Burma. Japan established an 'independent' Burmese government. Nu and San invited Thant to become Secretary of the country's Educational Reorganizing Committee, but Thant felt that his recommendations were being ignored and returned to Pantanaw after two months. Burmese independence proved illusory, with the occupying Japanese exercising strict control over the country. The nationalists now turned on the Japanese, with Nu and San organizing the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). Thant remained in Pantanaw and undertook modest acts of civil disobedience against Japanese authorities by listening to illegal short-wave broadcasts, storing rice for the resistance and refusing to find a Japanese-language teacher for his district. Japan's military defeat in 1945 led to a temporary restoration of British colonial rule, but San's successful negotiation with the UK's Labor government led to a new constitution and governing council dominated by the AFPFL. In 1948 Nu organized Burma's first fully independent government and invited Thant to become the AFPFL's press officer. The appointment forced Thant, who had moved to Rangoon to start a national magazine dedicated to learned opinion, to abandon the project. Instead, Thant's political career began its quick ascent. Over the next decade Thant occupied a series of high-level appointments, ranging from Director of Broadcasting and Secretary in the Ministry of Information to Executive Secretary of the country's Economic and Social Board. Because of Burma's role in the nascent Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Thant was given the opportunity to travel widely with and on behalf of Prime Minister Nu. In 1951 Thant visited Thailand and Indonesia and in 1952 he traveled to New York as member of the government's United Nations (UN) delegation. He attended the NAM's first two Prime Ministers' Conferences in Colombo, Ceylon and, in 1955, the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, which he helped to plan. These travels exposed him to leaders such as India's Jawaharal Nehru, China's Zhou Enlai, Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, North Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh and Yugoslavia's Josef Tito.

In 1957 Thant was appointed Burma's Permanent Representative to the UN, where he played a role in matters related to economic development and decolonization. He became Chair of the Working Committee on Algerian Independence (1959) and the Congo Conciliation Commission (1960) and was a Vice President of the General Assembly (1959). Shortly after the Security Council authorized the creation of the UN Operation in the Congo to bring peace to the newly independent state in July 1960, events on the ground and the UN's role in those events led to a rapid deterioration in relations

between the Soviet Union and Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld. The Soviet attack on Hammarskjöld spilled over into an assault on the institution of Secretary-General, with the proposal to substitute the office with a 'Troika'. When, in September 1961, Hammarskjöld was killed in a plane crash in Africa, the Soviet Union insisted on replacing him with three Secretaries-General, but retreated from this position in the face of Anglo-American resistance and the lack of enthusiasm for the Troika among Afro-Asian states. The United States (US) favored the appointment of former General Assembly President Frederick Boland from Ireland or Tunisian Ambassador and newly elected General Assembly President Mongi Slim, but Boland was uninterested and Slim unacceptable to France and the Soviet Union. With Non-Aligned governments pressing for the appointment of a Secretary-General from among their ranks and with Prime Minister Nu supportive of Thant's candidacy, Thant emerged by the end of September as the leading candidate for the position, despite his own preference for either Boland or Slim. On 14 October US Ambassador Adlai Stevenson announced on television that the US and the Soviet Union had agreed on Thant as Hammarskjöld's successor. But that agreement did not settle the matter. Over the next few weeks the US and the Soviet Union wrangled over the latter's proposal that the new Secretary-General be advised by a number of Under-Secretaries-General representing different regions of the world. Frustrated with the slow pace of negotiations, Thant threatened to offer his own 'take it or leave it' proposal on 26 October. On 2 November 1961 the Security Council recommended to the General Assembly that Thant be named Acting Secretary-General to fill out the remainder of Hammarskjöld's term, scheduled to end in April 1963, without preconditions. The next day the Assembly accepted the Council's recommendation. In deference to the dispute that accompanied the selection process, Thant announced that he would appoint a limited number of advisors, including UN officials Ralph Bunche of the US and Georgi Arkadev of the Soviet Union, but as Secretary-General he consulted them at his own volition and did not use them as a formal advisory body.

Thant's first test as Acting Secretary-General was the Congo, where a new outbreak of violence in December 1961 led to US- and UN-brokered negotiations that promised to end the Belgian-sponsored secession in the Katanga province. Katanga's leader, Moïse Tshombe, consistently retreated on promises to end the rebellion. In December 1962 a frustrated Thant ordered, with US backing, UN forces to launch an attack against Tshombe's army. UN forces overran Katangese positions and on 21 January 1963 Tshombe capitulated, thus ending the secession. Thant's assertive response to the crisis in the Congo indicated his embrace of his predecessors' view that the Secretary-General enjoyed the prerogative to intervene in global conflicts. In parallel, on 24 October 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, soon after US President John F. Kennedy announced a blockade to prevent the delivery of Soviet nuclear missile parts to Cuba, Thant, at the prompting of UN delegates from more than forty countries, wrote identical letters to Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev calling on the former to delay execution of the blockade and the latter to suspend arms shipments to Cuba. The US was irritated by Thant's intervention, but on 25 October Thant sent another letter to both leaders, this time at the direction of the Kennedy administration, calling for further restraint. Thant's action provided both leaders with a face-saving mechanism that allowed them to avoid a potentially catastrophic confrontation at sea and provided time for informal US-Soviet negotiations to commence. With the US and Soviet Union in agreement on a formula to end the crisis, Thant traveled to Havana to discuss a mechanism for monitoring the removal of the Soviet missiles with Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Although those negotiations ended in failure, both Kennedy and Khrushchev professed themselves to be pleased with Thant's performance. On 30 November 1962 the UN General Assembly appointed Thant as the UN's third Secretary-General, with his five-year term retroactive to his initial appointment as Acting Secretary-General.

The successful, but costly, Congo operation, along with the Soviet Union's and France's refusal to pay for some or all of the UN's peacekeeping activities, plunged the organization into fiscal crisis. Remarkably, though, during his first term Thant managed to organize a number of new peacekeeping initiatives, including types of operations not previously undertaken by the UN. New peacekeeping operations in West New Guinea (1962) and Yemen (1963) were paid for by the parties to the conflict,

while Thant solicited voluntary contributions from member governments to fund a peacekeeping force in Cyprus (1964). In June 1963 the governments of Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia tapped Thant to arbitrate their dispute over the formation of the Malaysian federation. In all of these cases Thant worked closely with the US, prompting Ambassador Stevenson to observe that the Secretary-General had 'proved remarkably cooperative and has been willing to accept our counsel to a degree which none of us could have predicted when he was first elected' (Firestone 2013: 86). Despite that relationship, Thant was deeply frustrated by his inability to play a constructive role in brokering an end to the Vietnam War. In September 1964, upon reaching out to the North Vietnamese government through a Soviet Secretariat member, Thant informed Ambassador Stevenson that the North Vietnamese were prepared to engage the US in secret negotiations. Stevenson responded that no decision would be made until after that year's presidential election. In January 1965, following President Lyndon B. Johnson's re-election, Thant followed up with Stevenson, only to be told that the US was not prepared to negotiate. Several days later the US began its systematic bombing of North Vietnam. Bitterly disappointed, Thant publicly revealed on 24 February that he had approached the administration with ideas for ending the conflict. Thant's public expression of frustration angered the Johnson administration, opening a breach over Vietnam that never fully closed. Nevertheless, Thant continued to explore diplomatic openings, even as he stepped up his public criticisms of the US war effort. In February 1967 he met with North Vietnamese diplomats in Rangoon, triggering a month-long but ultimately unsuccessful initiative on his part to bring both governments into direct negotiations. By the end of his first full term Thant expressed frustration at the limitations of his office. On 19 September 1966 he announced that he would not stand for re-election. By then, however, overwhelming support for another term was building among member governments, including the US, which believed, as US Ambassador Arthur J. Goldberg confided to Ralph Bunche: 'it would be impossible to get agreement on anyone else' (quoted in Firestone 2013: 1072). In response to that support Thant relented, but on condition that the Security Council reaffirm his role in peacekeeping. On 2 December the Council affirmed the Secretary-General's right to bring 'disturbing developments in many parts of the world to their notice' (Cordier and Harrelson 1976, Volume VII: 306) and successfully recommended Thant's re-election for another five-year term.

On 16 May 1967, at a time of growing tension between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the government of Egypt demanded the removal of the UN Emergency Force (UNEF), deployed since the end of the 1956 Suez War, from the border between Egypt and Israel. In a decision that provoked immediate controversy, Thant, who believed that a UN force could only remain on the territory of a sovereign state with that state's permission, acquiesced in the Egyptian demand, without referring the matter to the Security Council or the General Assembly. Several days later Thant flew to Cairo to discuss the crisis with Egyptian President Nasser, but by then Nasser's decision to close the Straits of Tiran to shipping bound for Israel had significantly raised the possibility of war. Meanwhile the Security Council met several times without taking any action. When war did break out on 5 June, Thant endured much of the criticism for having agreed so quickly to UNEF's withdrawal. On 22 November the Council passed Resolution 242, which established parameters for an Israeli-Arab peace and enjoined the Secretary-General to appoint a special representative to mediate between the two sides. During Thant's remaining years as Secretary-General the Arab-Israel conflict occupied much of his office's attention. In 1971 a war between India and Pakistan provided further evidence of the Secretary-General's limited ability to prevent war in the face of Security Council inaction. The war was precipitated by the Pakistani government's effort to suppress an independence movement in East Pakistan and the resulting influx of refugees into India. While Thant engineered relief efforts to ease the humanitarian crisis, he failed to convince the Security Council to address the underlying political issues. In July he sent an *aide-memoire* to the Security Council President and both governments, urging that the Council take up the growing political crisis, but without the support of the US or Soviet Union no meeting was held. On 3 December full-scale war erupted. With the Soviet Union backing India and the US and China backing Pakistan, the Security Council could not act, even in the face of a shooting war. On 21 December, only after East Pakistan was wrested from Pakistani control by Indian forces, did the Security Council pass a cease-fire resolution. Soon after Bangladesh came into

existence. Thant (1978: 436) wrote in his memoirs about his powerlessness in the face of imminent war: 'Throughout the struggle the United Nations had made no move to act; my pleas and warnings to the Security Council, both publicly and privately, fell on deaf ears'.

The fiscal crisis triggered an acute, organizational crisis, as the US in 1964-1965 unsuccessfully attempted to deny voting rights to the Soviet Union under the UN Charter's Article 19 over the latter's refusal to pay for peacekeeping operations. The accumulation of new social and economic programs, favored by Thant and the emerging Afro-Asian majority as components of the UN's Development Decade, placed further pressure on the UN budget and the financial difficulties of the organization. Despite the establishment in the early 1960s of a UN bond plan, spearheaded by the US, and Thant's own announcement in 1962 of a 'controlled expansion' plan to balance the new needs of the organization with fiscal realities, Thant was compelled to report by the decade's end that the organization's financial situation was 'steadily deteriorating' (Cordier and Harrison 1977, Volume VIII: 490). Thant attributed some of his inability to manage the organization's mounting financial and personnel problems on the competing pressures for time on his already busy schedule, but Thant, who in contrast to Hammarskjöld did not enter office with significant, prior managerial experience, left much of the detailed work of administration to his *Chef de Cabinet* Chakravarthi Narasimhan. By the end of Thant's tenure several Security Council members, including the US and Soviet Union, called for a budget freeze, while the blue-ribbon 1970 Jackson Report, named for its chair, Robert Jackson, harshly criticized the undisciplined expansion of the Secretariat and development programs.

With his second term scheduled to end in December 1971, Thant (1978: 437) announced on 23 January 1970 that he would not serve another term 'under any circumstances whatsoever'. On 2 November 1971 Thant was hospitalized for what was reported to be a 'bleeding ulcer' and on 2 December Bunche died after a long illness. *The New York Times* of 13 November reported that while several governments, including the Soviet Union, France and a number of African states, preferred that the Secretary-General continue in his post, Thant's illness 'has eliminated the last remaining hope that contrary to [Thant's] wishes he might be persuaded to stay on for a few months'. It was thus to Thant's great 'relief' that the Security Council finally chose a successor with less than one month left in his term. On 1 January 1972 Thant was replaced by Austrian diplomat and politician Kurt Waldheim. In retirement, Thant became Senior Fellow at the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs, where he worked on his memoirs, but he succumbed to lung cancer in November 1974. Thant's death became the occasion for massive anti-government protests after the return of his body to Burma on 5 December. President Ne Win, who had overthrown Thant's friend Nu in 1962 and imposed a dictatorship in place of the previous democracy, refused to accord Thant the proper honors. In protest students seized Thant's body and buried him on the grounds of Rangoon University. With demonstrations mounting, government forces managed to overwhelm the protesters and recover Thant's body, burying him near the Shwedagon Pagoda. In death, Thant had become a symbol of democracy for his fellow Burmese.

Thant's legacy as UN Secretary-General is mixed. The period of early success, including the suppression of the Congo secession and the advent of innovative peacekeeping initiatives and operations, gave way to a period of relative quiescence, as the organization grappled with crippling financial burdens and political deadlock. Although the accession of many new members from the developing world led to bold resolutions and programs to combat racism and income maldistribution across the world, Thant's tenure registered scant progress in combatting apartheid in southern Africa and did little to affect the wealth gap between the Global North and South. However, Thant, who became Acting Secretary-General at a time when the office was under withering assault from the Soviet Union, restored Soviet support for the institution if not the expanded peacekeeping powers of the Secretary-General. He did so in part by maintaining wide support among the UN's newest members, who saw in him a symbol of their own rise and an advocate for their interests. Despite his natural reticence, Thant could be remarkably blunt when publicly criticizing permanent members of the Security Council for their respective governments' policies. Although he occasionally rankled the

US and the Soviet Union with strong critiques of their policies, he understood the limits of his ability to use the organization to change their behavior and therefore avoided the fates of his two predecessors, who had irrevocably alienated one or both of the superpowers. In personality and demeanor Thant stood in striking contrast to the charismatic Hammarskjöld. Whereas Hammarskjöld presented himself as a person of unsurpassed intelligence and philosophical bent, Thant, according to former Secretariat official Brian Urquhart (1993: 348), came across as 'simple and direct', a 'man of few words... and imperturbable calm' and a 'modest and unpretentious middlebrow'. Whereas Hammarskjöld engaged in sometimes daring, personal diplomatic initiatives, the more reserved and cautious Thant normally left negotiations to his Special Representatives, and he leaned heavily on Bunche, a Hammarskjöld holdover who became Thant's most trusted advisor. As the first non-European Secretary-General, Thant was especially sensitive to issues that energized the Non-Aligned states. In reflecting back on his involvement in the politics of the developing world, Thant (1978: 36) acknowledged that he found himself 'increasingly identified with the causes of small nations, poor nations, newly independent nations, and nations struggling for independence. So my conception of the United Nations was primarily from the vantage point of the Third World'. Although the Cold War continued to dominate the UN agenda, Thant believed that the US-Soviet conflict would eventually recede or end. Instead, tensions arising from colonialism, racism and income inequality would, in the long term, pose a greater threat to world peace (Gordenker 1966-1967: 2). He was, therefore, a strong opponent of colonialism, particularly in southern Africa, and a proponent of economic development. As a Buddhist who meditated daily Thant was a believer in tolerance and an opponent of violence. He also brought to the position a liberal faith in the ability of states to resolve their differences through discussion rather than war.

Archives

U Thant's archives and correspondence as Secretary-General are located in the United Nations Archives in New York City, see <https://archives.un.org/content/u-thant>. U Thant House, located in Yangon, Myanmar features a permanent exhibition with photographs and film footage tracing U Thant's life from his birth in Pantanaw to his tenure as Secretary-General, see uthanthouse.org

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