By Douglas Long

WITH all the hype in recent months about Myanmar ending 50 years of isolation, it bears remembering that the secretary general of the United Nations from 1961 to 1971 was a top diplomat from Myanmar.

It’s also worth noting that 50 years ago this month, this particular secretary general, U Thant, not only presided over the UN during the Cuban Missile Crisis — one of the most dire international emergencies of the 20th century — but also played a key role in ensuring that the situation did not devolve into an apocalyptic frenzy of nuclear destruction.

The crisis unfolded over 13 days in 1962, from October 16 to 28, after photos taken by U-2 spy plane pilot Richard Heyser alerted US president John F Kennedy to the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba.

This revelation led the US government to mull airstrikes on Cuba, but Mr Kennedy went against the advice of many Senate leaders and instead implemented a naval blockade.

By October 24 the situation looked desperate: Reconnaissance photographs showed that the missiles in Cuba were in launch position and US and Soviet warships were engaged in a standoff, only a few hundred metres apart and pointing their weapons at one another.

On the same day, the US military’s five-level defense readiness condition (DEFCON) was advanced from Level 3 (increase in force readiness above normal readiness) to Level 2 (next step to nuclear war), still the highest in history.

Historically, there has been plenty of bluster from the US side about how military superiority forced the Soviets to back down but a report published in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists on October 12 details the crucial, and largely forgotten, role played by U Thant’s quiet, intelligent and tireless diplomacy in averting disaster.

The report — written by Walter Dorn and Robert Pauk, and titled “The Closest Brush: How a UN Secretary General Averted Doomsday” — says that documents in the UN archives and oral histories show that U Thant “received a direct yet secret request from the United States, initiated by President Kennedy himself, to perform intermediary functions during the crisis”.

Thant also took bold initiatives of his own accord.”

By Soe Than Lynn in Sittwe

THE secretary of the Rakhine State government’s information committee has denied claims Rakhine people have been targeted by security forces, saying soldiers acted without “bias or mistakes” in quelling riots in Kyauktaw and Rathedaung townships.

The comments came as state media reported on October 27 that 67 people had been killed and 95 injured in the latest outbreak of violence in the region.

A number of Rakhine people were killed or seriously injured due to gunshot wounds inflicted by security forces on October 25. The accusations of bias were based on the fact that almost no Rohingyas, or Bengalis, had sought treatment at hospitals.

The Myanmar Times witnessed 14 Rakhine people with gunshot and knife wounds arrive at Kyauktaw Township Hospital between 6pm and 9pm on October 25. One man, from Tinnakaiky village, died shortly after arrival from a gunshot wound to the head, while another died while being brought from Taungbyaw village to the hospital by boat. The body of another deceased man with a gunshot wound was brought to Kyauktaw Hospital early on October 26.

“The forces only shot in order to frighten and disperse mobs. But they continued to shoot when the mobs became bigger so there may have been deaths due to gunshot wounds,” U Win Myaing told reporters in Sittwe on October 26.

“In the incident in Letsaungkauk village, Kyauktaw township, some were shot by handmade firearms known as tumi. In the aftermath, some tumi were confiscated. There was no bias or mistakes made by the forces,” he said.

U Win Myaing said communal clashes were sparked by a domestic dispute in a Rohingya family in Minbya township, with violence spreading to Kyaukpyu, Mrauk Oo, Myebon, Kyauktaw and Rathetaung townships.

“It started in a remote area on the border of Minbya and Rakhine death toll hits 67 as govt defends soldiers

A man with a gunshot wound is treated at Kyauktaw Township Hospital in Rakhine State on October 25. Pic: Kaung Htet

Averting the apocalypse: U Thant’s finest hour

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Govt warns of crackdown
Legal action will be taken against those inciting Rakhine violence ‘behind the scenes’

By Ei Ei Toe Lwin

The government has warned of a planned crackdown against unnamed people and organisations it accuses of manipulating the violent incidents in Rakhine State “behind the scenes”.

A front-page statement in state media on October 26 threatened to expose those responsible and said “legal action will be taken against them.”

The statement, dated October 25, referred to recent rioting in Kyaukpyu, Mrauk Oo, Myebon and Mrauk Oo townships that has left 67 dead and 80 wounded, and caused widespread property damage. Following the riots in Rakhine State in May and June, in which about 80 people died, President U Thein Sein declared a state of emergency in the region.

The October riots began in Yaing That village, Mrauk Oo township.

“We don’t know exactly what the problem was, but the violence spread. Both communities (Rakhine and Muslim) clashed and set fire to each other’s houses,” said U Myo Thant, a communications officer of the Information and Records Committee of Rakhine State, told The Myanmar Times on October 25.

The committee was established on June 5 by the Rakhine State government and central government departments.

“We can’t say how many Rakhine people and how many Muslims died in the violence. Muslim houses suffered more damage than Rakhine houses. Only Rakhine injured came to the camps, but that doesn’t mean no Muslims were injured. The state government sent medical personnel to the Muslim villages, but we don’t have a list of casualties yet,” said U Myo Thant.

“As of last night the situation is stable,” he said on October 26, adding that state police and Tatmadaw and security forces had managed to restore order. Food and supplies have been distributed to displaced residents at monasteries and other locations.

“We are living in fear,” said Mrauk Oo resident U Maung Shal. “There are more Muslims than Rakhine. The security forces came to the camps, but that doesn’t mean no Muslims were injured. The state government should send medical personnel to the Muslim villages, but we don’t have a list of casualties yet,” said U Myo Thant.

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“The government statement underlined the fact that the unrest took place at a time when Myanmar has achieved the support and international recognition of its drive for smooth transition in the democratisation process within a short period of time and when the international community is watching ongoing progress in Myanmar with interest.”

In a related development, the Yangon-based Islamic Religious Affairs Council last week called on Muslims not to celebrate the Eid Al-Adha festival in Myanmar on October 23 amid security fears.

On October 26, U Zaw Htay, director of the President’s office, announced on his Facebook page that every Myanmar citizen was equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practise religion subject to the other provisions of the Constitution.

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The following photographs were published as part of a photo gallery on The Myanmar Times’ website on October 29, 2012. They can be viewed at: http://mmtimes.com/index.php/in-pictures/2751-violence-spreads-in-rakhine-state.html