

## The opening of the Rangoon XS centre in Burma.

Burma, a former British dependency, became independent in 1948 under the name of Union of Burma. The term "Union" being justified by the fact that the new country was made of various ethnic minorities who in the past have been continuously fighting each other. Again during the first decade of independence the political situation was quite tumultuous. U Nu, as a Prime Minister, had been revealing himself as a good performer at the international level but was too weak to keep the domestic situation well under control. In 1962 by a coup d'état, General Ne Win took control over Burma.

Under the military government Burma became a country completely closed, all trading activities and industries were nationalized and tourism was not even taken into consideration. The only way to visit Rangoon was to transit for less than 36 hours coming through an air route and leaving through another air route with all flights duly confirmed.

International trade was performed by means of official auctions. For instance Burma is well known for its production of precious stones and auctions were organized at least once a year for selling them to the world. On such occasions visas were granted to potential buyers but in any case each passenger's flights had to be firmly confirmed before the concerned could be allowed to enter the country. However the only means of communication was AFTN, the Aeronautical Fixed Telecommunication Network. The problem was that reservation messages had the lowest priority level (prefix LL) and some countries like India would not even accept them, or some other would charge LL messages at a very high rate such as half a US dollar per half a line of 72 characters, the length of each message being measured from the length of perforated tape used for retransmission.

As a result of such rules and environment I was receiving constant complaints of airlines about transmission costs and delays in and out of Burma.

In 1967 I applied for an entry visa in order to meet the PTT as well as the UBA - Union of Burma Airways - management. The clerk at the consulate asked for a letter explaining the purpose and reasons of my request, 12 photographs, photocopy of my passport and so on and told me that he himself had to request the agreement of the Interior Ministry before sending the complete file to them. He then added with a smile: "I will let you know of the outcome"

Meanwhile I was busy with other projects in India and the Pacific however having not heard anything about my request a year later I visited the consulate again just to be shown my photographs still in the clerk's desk drawer and being told that he was still waiting for an answer from the Ministry.

I then decided to make use of the transit visa facility although knowing that not much could be achieved within 36 hours. My itinerary was Calcutta, Rangoon, Bangkok. In Rangoon I met very polite people but no one was ready to give any consideration to my project. From that trip I concluded that I had to use a completely different approach if I wanted to make any progress. I knew people in all airports around and I discussed the matter with airlines and other companies providing ground handling to UBA. All of them

had problems communicating with UBA and they were ready to help. Being practically in daily contact with that airline these people also knew who was holding power in it. Finally we arranged in such way that the next time one of these handling companies will have a meeting with a high ranking operational staff of UBA they will invite me to attend it and will emphasize the need to solve the communication problems. It did work that way and a couple of months later I had the opportunity to meet Captain Latt, the UBA Managing Director.

As an active airman Captain Latt was prompt to understand the problems created by the lack of good communications and took interest in SITA, the nature of which he apparently had never been made seriously aware so far. From that meeting things started moving. I was granted a visa and visited UBA Head Quarters as well as the PTT. However, outside of the UBA sphere, progresses were much slower. I heard from the civil servants I met the same remarks already heard in some other places: "We have shut down other telecoms companies (in the Burma case: IAL) why should we by now open the door to SITA ?" A lot of arguments can be exchanged on that subject without convincing anyone on either sides of the table. But by then we had the support of UBA now fully convinced by their partners. In the Far East excellent and long standing relationship between partners, suppliers and customers are the basis of any good business. In that case UBA and other Burmese parties involved were told convincingly: "You can trust SITA people and their man in the region, they form a very efficient company running without problems", and thanks to their strong support we finally obtained the official go ahead.

Burma, like other Far Eastern countries, was connected to Hong Kong with a TOR (Teletype On Radio) equipment providing two 60wpm teletype circuits. SITA leased a 15 wpm out of them, rented premises, recruited staff, whereas in meantime UBA became a SITA member.

The Rangoon SITA centre became operational on 16 December 1969.

U Chit Hla, a former flying wireless operator of UBA, became the first Country Manager as RGNUAXS and lead SITA quite well until his retirement.

A20 minutes video of Burma shot in super 8 film at the time of the opening of the centre is available on dropbox:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/kj0r7lbswqtut8u/Burma%20XS.mp4?dl=0>

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