

This Day in History... January 22, 1909

Birth of UN Leader U Thant

U Thant was born in Pantanaw, British Burma, on January 22, 1909.

The oldest of four sons, Thant was born into a successful family of landowners and rice merchants. After attending Rangoon's University College (currently called the University of Yangon), U Thant returned to his hometown to teach at the National School and serve as headmaster when he was 25. During his time there, U Thant befriended Burma's future prime minister, U Nu.

In 1948, U Nu appointed U Thant as director of broadcasting. U Thant later spent six years working as U Nu's secretary, writing speeches, arranging his travel, and meeting foreign visitors. During this time, U Thant also served as the secretary of the first Asian-African Conference in 1955, which led to the Non-Aligned Movement. Between 1957 and 1961, he was Burma's UN representative and assisted in the negotiations for Algerian independence.



U Thant became UN secretary-general after Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash.

Upon the unexpected death of UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in 1961, the UN Security Council unanimously selected U Thant to complete Hammarskjöld's term in office. He was the first non-European to ever hold the position. He was later re-elected to a second term.

During his first term, U Thant helped arrange the negotiations between US president John F. Kennedy and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev that helped bring an end to the Cuban Missile Crisis. In December 1962, he instituted Operation Grandslam, which averted Civil War in Congo.

During his ten years in office, U Thant oversaw the admission of dozens of new Asian and African states into the United Nations. He strongly opposed the Vietnam War and apartheid in South Africa. Additionally, U Thant created many of the UN's development and environmental agencies, funds, and programs, such as the UN University, the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and the UN Environmental Programme.



"Wars begin in the minds of men, and in those minds, love and compassion would have built the defenses of peace."

U Thant also created the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). It was formed in 1964 to give developing countries a place to discuss problems with their economic development. UNCTAD creates policies relating to various aspects of development including trade, aid, transport, finance, and technology.

And in 1965 U Thant oversaw the creation of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The UNDP uses scientific studies and advanced technology to show each nation's citizens ways to make use of their natural resources in the most efficient ways possible.

U Thant declined to serve a third term and retired in 1971. He died only three years later. Despite his contributions to the world, at the time of his death Burma was led by a military government, which refused him any honors. Tens of thousands of people filled the streets of Rangoon to pay their last respects.



"As a Buddhist, I was trained to be tolerant of everything except intolerance."



"Every human being, of whatever origin, of whatever station, deserves respect."



The overall aim of UNCTAD is to promote international trade between countries at different stages of development.

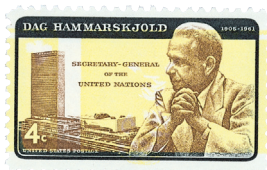
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