

This week in history: November 18-24

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago

17 November 2024

25 years ago: Border between Thailand and Myanmar reopens after almost two-month closure

On November 24, the border between Thailand and Myanmar was finally reopened after a seven-week shutdown. The ruling military junta in Myanmar had imposed an economic blockade in response to an attack on its embassy in Thailand.

In October, five gunmen from the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors (VBSW), an armed petty-bourgeois student movement formed out of the “8888 Uprising” against the military junta’s dictatorship and its disastrous economic policies, charged the Myanmar embassy in Thailand and rounded up 89 hostages. The armed attackers, carrying assault rifles, hand grenades, and grenade launchers, issued demands such as the formation of a national parliament based on the results of the 1990 elections.

The Thai government reached an agreement whereby the VBSW militants released all hostages but were not charged with any crimes. This was seen as an affront to the Myanmar junta, which insisted that the armed students be arrested, tried, and convicted to suffocate any oppositional movement in a country on the brink of economic collapse. Only a couple of months before, the Myanmar ruling class had repressed anti-government protesters on the anniversary of the popular uprising in 1988.

Thailand’s ruling class at first responded to the crisis by increasing pressure on the Myanmar government. Thai Interior Minister Sanan Kachornprasart tacitly encouraged the protests, stating, “We don’t consider them to be terrorists. They are student activists who are fighting for democracy.” Shortly after the attack, the *Bangkok Post* declared that Myanmar’s “junta will never have our sympathy,” and that “the Burmese leaders would do well to realize that the tide of history is against them and they would do well to help usher in democracy in their country or be swept aside.”

In retaliation for Thailand’s favorable treatment of the VBSW, Myanmar closed the two nations’ long border, including the Ranong crossing in the south, the major Friendship Bridge and the Mae Sai crossing in northern Thailand. With trade cut off, the Thai economy suffered. Myanmar forbade Thai fishing vessels from entering its territorial waters. Some 400 Thai fishing vessels were impacted. The head of the provincial Fisheries Department at the southern Thai port of Ranong, Sutha Theareephat, said that fishing and related industries lost 43 million baht (\$US1.1 million) a day.

Meanwhile, the blockade hammered Myanmar’s poorest section with rising food and fuel costs in towns and cities near the Thai border.

The border and political dispute was resolved when Thai Foreign

Minister Surin Pitsuwan visited the Myanmar capital of Rangoon before a meeting in the Philippines of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Myanmar agreed to allow Thailand to deal with the five students under Thai law. In return, Thailand waived import duties on agricultural producers, renegotiated fishing contracts, and offered Myanmar a low-interest loan to construct a road from the city of Mae Sot in Thailand to Myanmar. The military junta also allowed Thai capitalists to continue exploiting more immigrant workers from Myanmar as a source of cheap labor.

50 years ago: UN passes resolution recognizing Palestinian right to return

On November 22, 1974, the United Nations passed Resolution 3236 recognizing the right of the Palestinian people to national self-determination and to return to their homes from which hundreds of thousands had been displaced since 1948. The UN also granted the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) observer status in the UN General Assembly to speak on behalf of Palestinians.

Since the 1967 Six Day War, Israel had occupied all Palestinian territories including Gaza and the West Bank. In that war Israel launched a surprise invasion into the neighboring Arab states, delivering significant military setbacks. In addition to Palestinian lands, Israel occupied the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula until the end of the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

While the agreement signed by Egypt and Israel to end the Yom Kippur War returned the Sinai Peninsula and the Suez Canal to Egyptian control, it made no provisions for Palestinians living under occupation. Going back to the 1948 Nakba expulsion from their homes, many Palestinians had been living in large refugee camps in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt.

The UN resolution on Palestine stated, “no just solution to the problem of Palestine has yet been achieved” and it recognized that “the problem of Palestine continues to endanger international peace and security.” It further stated that the UN recognizes that the Palestinian people are entitled to rights of self-determination as laid out in the UN Charter and that the Palestinian people have been “prevented from enjoying its inalienable rights.”

The resolution went on to state specifically that Palestinian refugees have the right “to return to their homes and property from which they have been displaced and uprooted.” It made special notes to indicate that the restoration of the rights and homelands of Palestinians was a fundamental prerequisite for establishing “a just and lasting peace in the

Middle East.”

The resolution passed by a vote of in the UN General Assembly of 89 for, 8 against, with 37 abstentions. Through the vote, the overwhelming majority of the world indicated that it supported the full rights of Palestinians and opposed the illegal actions of the US-backed Israeli regime and its imperialist ambitions in the Middle East.

The votes against the resolution consisted only of the United States and its most closely controlled allied states including Bolivia, Chile, Nicaragua, Iceland, Norway, Costa Rica and, of course, Israel.

The demands made by the resolution were of a generally correct and democratic character. However, the passage of the resolution also exposed the fact that the United Nations was totally useless as a tool to combat imperialism. Despite passing the resolution no action was taken that would have forced the end of the occupation of Palestine.

The accession of the PLO to the UN also marked the beginning of the protracted transition of the organization from an anti-imperialist resistance group into an “official” organization that ultimately turned it into Israel’s Palestinian collaborator.

75 years ago: Labour government nationalizes the British iron and steel industries

On November 24, 1949, the British parliament approved the Iron and Steel Act which nationalized large sections of the industry. Approximately 94 British companies that accounted for around half of the UK’s iron and steel production were brought under public ownership, while around 2,000 smaller companies remained privately owned. The act was to take effect on February 15, 1951.

Bringing iron and steel production under state control had been a policy proposal of the Labour Party since at least 1945, when it was featured in its party manifesto. Its aim was to reduce prices and keep steel produced by Britain competitive in the increasingly global economy. Labour MP John Jones would declare the following year that “steel workers have no right to demand nationalization for themselves,” but rather they would be “expecting the industry to be nationalized for and on behalf of Britain...”

Notwithstanding the economic calculations, there was also a consideration within the British government that it was necessary to provide the working class with a so-called “positive alternative to Communism,” in the words of Labour MP Fred Mulley. Certain concessions had to be presented and granted to the workers to avoid a revolutionary upsurge of the most militant sections of the working class.

This was a conception shared by the Conservative Party. Years earlier, Conservative MP Quinton Hogg had warned: “If you don’t give the people social reform they will give you social revolution.”

The Iron and Steel Act of 1949 was a continuation of previous nationalization policies undertaken by the Atlee Labour government in the post-World War II period. These included the coal industry in 1946, the electricity and transport sectors in 1947, and the gas industry in 1948.

But unlike in those previous nationalization acts, the iron and steel corporations brought under state control in 1949 remained in operation under the management of boards appointed by the newly established Iron and Steel Corporation of Great Britain. Only the share capital of the companies was acquired by the state, an approach which was previously taken with the nationalization of the Bank of England in 1946.

After only two years of public ownership, the Iron and Steel Act of 1949 was repealed by the subsequent Iron and Steel Act of 1953. Passed by the newly elected Conservative government, it began the process of re-privatization as the nationalized companies were sold back into the private sector.

100 years ago: First specimen of Australopithecus identified

On November 24, 1924, Australian anthropologist Raymond Dart at the University of the Witwatersrand identified a skull discovered at a limestone quarry in Taung, South Africa as the first specimen of the hominin species *Australopithecus africanus*.

He believed that the skull, now known as the Taung Child, was that of a child and that scratches on the surface indicated that it had been seized by a bird of prey but, more importantly, that it represented a new human ancestor, intermediate in evolution between earlier apes and modern humans. The cranial capacity, 400-500 cc, resembled that of a chimpanzee, but other features, such as the forehead and eye sockets, resembled those of humans.

Dart’s initial classification of the skull was published in *Nature* in 1925 and was broadly criticized by his colleagues. Some felt that the fossil belonged to a species far closer to gorillas and chimpanzees, and that it did not belong to the human lineage at all. Others felt that there was simply not enough evidence to categorize it as a hominin.

It took over two decades for Dart’s classification to be accepted, partially because further excavations in Africa revealed other specimens of hominins like the Taung Child. In 1947, one of Dart’s fiercest critics announced that he now accepted the classification of the Taung Child as an australopithecine, a view that is now generally accepted. The skull has subsequently been dated by radiometric analysis to about 2.8 million years before the present.

Dart’s discovery was a huge advance in the understanding of human evolution. It is now thought that members of the genus he first identified inhabited southern Africa from 4.4 to 1.4 million years ago.

Scientists hypothesize that members of the *Australopithecus africanus* species were probably omnivores who walked upright. Recent research which compared patterns of muscle attachments on finger bones of various hominins and apes indicates that *A. africanus* probably engaged in some tool use. Males are estimated to have weighed approximately 90 pounds (41 kg) and stood 4 feet 6 inches (138 cm) tall; females weighed about 66 pounds (30 kg) and stood about 3 feet 9 inches (115 cm) tall.



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