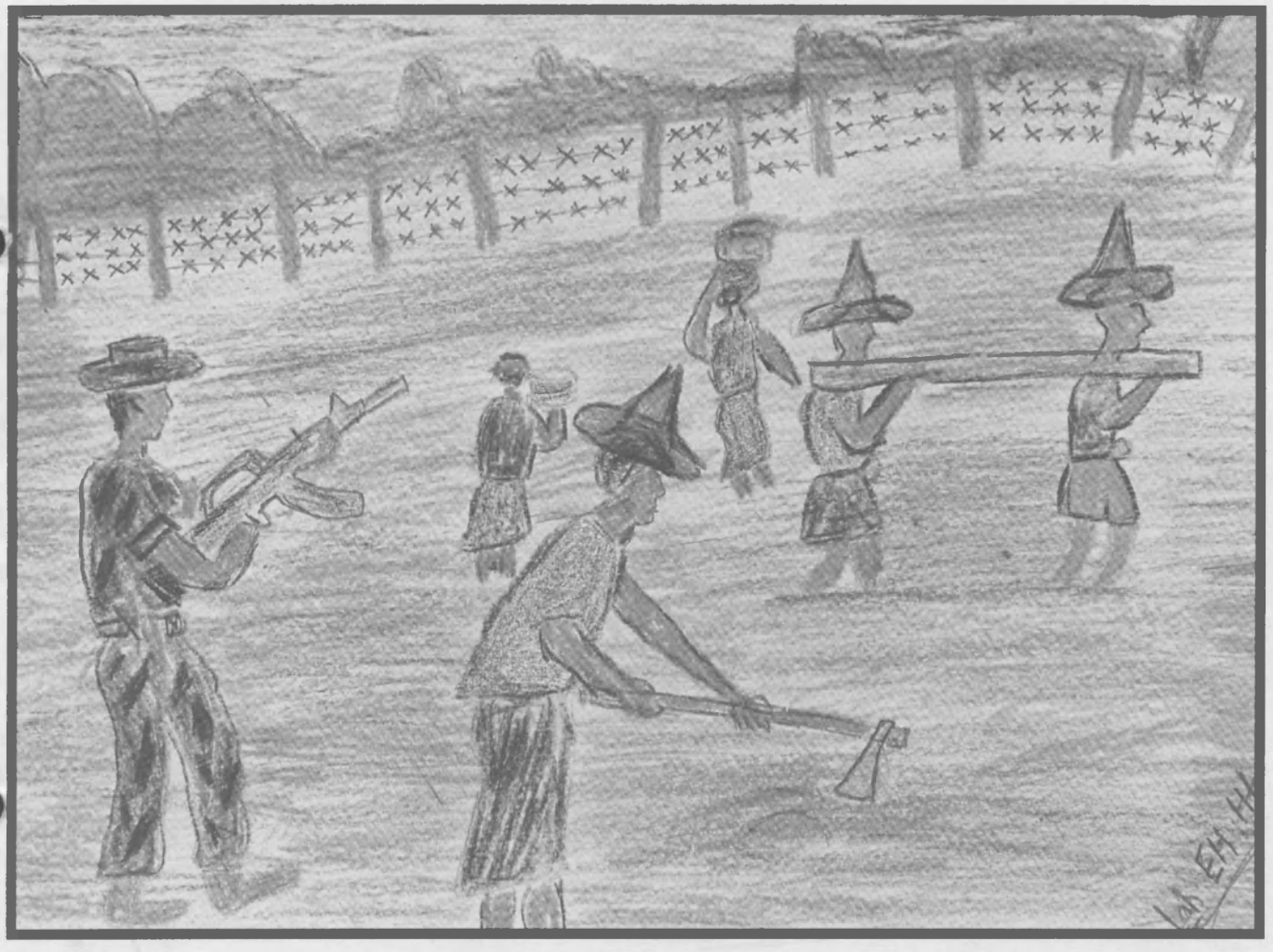
BURMA ISSUES

News, Analysis & Peoples' Stories

March 1999 **Volume 9 Number 3**

You comrades are having to shoulder the Tatmadaw's [armed forces] primary duty and duties of State simultaneously. You will have to strive four or five times harder than usual....You cannot move at normal pace, It is necessary that you do not forget the rough path Tatmadawmen have taversed in life and [that you have] to toil day and night, rain or shine, even passing up food." from Senior General Than Shwe's address on the 54th Armed Forces Day.



"Forced Labour" by Lah Eh Htoo.

***Burma Issues*, the monthly newsletter of Burma Issues, highlights current information related to the struggle for peace and justice in Burma. It is distributed internationally on a free-subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned about the state of affairs in Burma.**

P.O. Box 1076
Silom Post Office
Bangkok 10504,Thailand
durham@mozart.inet.co.th

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THE OPPOSITE OF DEMOCRACY

For the Burmese[people], government—together with fire, famine, flood and plague—is one of the 'five traditional enemies." It may protect its subjects from dacoity and other forms of social and economic disruptions, and indeed it is expected to do so, but in general it is viewed as an exploitative, mercenary power, which one is best advised to avoid. The less one has to do with it, the better. It is understood that one has obligations to the government, which, if unfulfilled, will lead to punitive consequences. These obligations, therefore, should be met—hopefully, with the expectations that one will receive benefits therefrom, but, minimally, with some assurance that, having done so, one need not fear its punishment. For some problems—the redress of a wrong, the granting of a loan, the fixing of an irrigation canal—only the government can help, but its help is most readily assured by means of gifts, bribes, and other presentations.[1]

Peace in Burma requires not only a change in government but also a revolution in how power and status are defined in Burmese society. If democracy—with all the rights, freedoms and duties it connotes— is a goal, then Burma must consider and address how democracy will work as both a form of government and as a way of life. This entails first understanding and eventually undoing dictatorship in all its forms.

Just as dictatorship and democracy are concrete styles of government, so too are they subtle and pervasive cultural systems expressed in the beliefs and behavior of the people. Each governmental style is based on and supported by a corresponding belief or ethic in society. The norms of equality and responsibility, for example, help maintain a healthy democracy. In fact, genuine democracy exists as much in the nature of the egalitarian and mutually accountable relationships among citizens— and between the people and the state— as in the processes of government. Therefore, a democratic government depends on the extent and the nature of democratic attitudes held by its citizens.

By comparison, dictatorship usually describes what happens at the pinnacle of power, the control and dictates of a small and unrepresentative body, perhaps an individual. In addition to the mechanisms of state control, such as military force, the police, repressive laws and an unfair legal system, dictatorship also depends on a corresponding social system which governs how people perceive and treat one another. In Burma this system is the patron-client model, a pervasive social code prescribing the freedoms and privileges of nearly all members of society. Two categories of social actors, patrons and clients, relate through the exchange of tribute and political favor. According to one study,

...acceptance of a hierarchical order is the basis of patron-client relationships and the central pillar of political culture... Little people must find a patron and offer respect, gifts and services in order to ensure favor and security. Big people try to build up their clientele in order to maximize the flow of gifts and favors. People in high office must generate enough money to provide resources and protection for their followers in order to maintain their loyalty in the context of keen competition among different factions.[2]

The patron-client system is a strategy for providing economic and political protection in a society where there is poorly developed or negligent government. Nevertheless, it depends largely on the office and ambitions of bureaucrats. In some critical ways, it replaces the official job of the government bureaucrat with duties amalgamated from the interests of his clientele and his own efforts to accumulate power.

The patron-client relationship continues to be important because institutions which bridge between the people and the state (parliaments, political parties) are still weak. The patron-client relationship connects the officials to the people and is the most organized system to allocate social gains and interests... The patron-client relationship flourishes in a society where there is no equality in property, status and power.[3]

The classic example of a patron-client system is feudal monarchy. The monarch is the paramount patron, whose economic and political power is maintained through a hierarchy of aristocratic clients, who in turn build up their own clientele in a cascading patronage system which reaches down to the individual household. As tribute flows up the hierarchy— perhaps in the form of taxes, labor and military recruits—protection and the occasional favor are rewarded to loyal and dutiful clients. The categories of patron and client are relative rather than absolute—even a powerful patron is always client to someone higher in the system. The monarch may claim to be the single, special client designated by an omnipotent superhuman force. The system pervades from the palace to the peasant household, dictating relations among aristocrats and commoners alike, and the fine social distinctions which inform their class-consciousness.

To what extent does patron-client politics operate in Burmese society? The foundation of hierarchy is fundamental to Burmese culture. The hierarchy is both expressed and reinforced in a variety of cultural institutions, including Theravada Buddhism, the national education system and, of course, the military—itself a hierarchy by definition. Perhaps the significance of hierarchy can best be gauged by people's awareness of its role in social relations and by their responsiveness to its demands. One anthropologist notes how hierarchy determines interaction throughout the range of social classes:

The Burmese villager, for example, commands his coolies and children but is servient to the village headman. The latter, proud in his relationship to the villagers, is obsequious in his dealings with the township officer. Although arrogant to the village headman, the latter adopts the demeanor in the presence of a ranking military officer that the headman displays toward him. It is remarkable to observe these shifts from arrogance to subservience in the same person as he passes from a structurally defined subordinate status to a superordinate one, sometimes within the interval of a few minutes. Indeed, one can observe this alteration even within the same interactional unit, as when a clerk, conferring with a peasant in the presence of his administrative superior, changes from insolence to obsequiousness by merely turning his face from one to the other.[4]

Varying styles of hierarchy have also been identified among Burma's non-Burman minorities. For example, both traditional Shan and some Kachin societies are based on hierarchy.[5] Similarly, hierarchy and patronage systems occur in various ways across Karen groups. In all cases, wealth and/or prestige is gained through association with the locally-recognized influence of a larger patron. What he lacks in material enticements for his own clientele, the small-scale Burmese patron makes up for in the offer of factional alignment with a prestigious person.

This system is essentially conservative, seeking to maintain a prevailing social order. Patron-client relations depend on hierarchy, but also protect and reinforce it. The patron-client system works because it depends on hierarchy. At the same time, however, it mitigates the hierarchy's potentially destabilizing implications by looking out for the inter-

ests— albeit unequally— of superiors and subordinates alike. It only works with the willing cooperation of the clientele, who not only seek their own interests but (in their capacity as relative patrons themselves) also seek to parlay whatever benefits accrue to them into greater power and prestige vis-a-vis their own client base. Therefore, there is something in it for everyone, but it is also taken for granted that the higher up one is the more he can expect and the more he will receive. It is not free-market competition among equals, but a system for maintaining power and privilege along a gradient. Although clients may have some choice about where to place their loyalties, this freedom is limited—they may not opt out of the system, for that would make them unaligned with any patron, hence unprotected.

This system is essentially undemocratic, because it fails to recognize an inherent equality among citizens. It dismisses the right to exercise rights and freedom as equal citizens vis-a-vis the state, without an intermediate agent of power—a local patron—to redefine and redistribute rights according to an arbitrary, if widely recognized, regime. Because social institutions are too weak to provide just and equal treatment under the law, or social security, or equitable economic structures, people are left to their own devices. This results in loyalty not to a government of, by and for the people—and thus to one another—but to some local persona who substitutes for it.

Though undemocratic, the patron-client system is built perfectly to wear the clothes of democracy. Political parties are merely coalitions of high-status patrons and clients organized to consolidate their power. National elections, in which every citizen is guaranteed the right to vote for a party of his choice, are merely institutionalized and very expensive bids by patrons to expand their clientele.

How are relative stability and benefit defined in Burma today, a country facing perpetual economic and political crisis? In some ways, the benefits patrons may offer to their clients are defined in relation to the military's great concentration of power. Benefits may come to local clients in the form of exemptions—exemption from a day of compulsory labor, exemption from an arbitrary tax, exemption from the watchful regulation of ward or village authorities. These are examples of how a local patron, perhaps himself aligned with the military, offers patronage in the form of protection from the state.

An indication of the severity of Burma's social and governmental crisis is that to survive, people need some degree of protection from the state, and therefore welcome the favors of a local patron and the obligations they must fulfill towards him. For this reason it may not be entirely correct to understand dictatorship as a system reviled by the people, though dictators and their actions certainly may be. Dictatorship is merely the capstone on a political pyramid built on the patron-client system.

While a change in government continues to be a crucial objective in Burma's struggle, it is not the be-all and end-all in the search for social justice. For democratic governance to take root, it must be firmly planted in the people's readiness to live in a democratic society. Political change may happen quickly, but cultural change will be comparatively slow. What will it take to replace the deeply set patron-client model? An immediate priority should be to purge institutionalized corruption from government bureaucracy. Neither a democratically-elected government, nor even a better economy, automatically reduce corruption, This problem must be dealt with directly. This can begin even under the current government, by reaching Burmese people with the message that patronage is not the birthright of state employees.

Furthermore, Burma can achieve democracy by transforming the cultural structures which reinforce patronage. We must ask how patronage is reinforced in the education system, in religion, in popular culture and in the media. This question can lead to realization of how society reinforces its own anti-democratic ideals. From this understanding, Burma can rebuild its curricula, its press, even its movies to reflect the idea that all people are equal in their rights, freedoms and their accountability to one another.

❖ Chris Cusano

Endnotes: "The Opposite...

1 ***Burmese Supernaturalism*, Melford E. Spiro, p.138.**
2 ***Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*, Pasuk Phangpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyangsan, Silkworm Books, Bangkok 1994 pp. 4-5.**
3 ***Corruption and Democracy in Thailand***
4 ***Social Change and Functional Analysis: A Study in Burmese Psycholcultural History*, Melford E. Spiro, in "Anthropological Other or Burmese Brother?", Transaction Books, London, 1992, p. 204.**
5 ***Political Systems of Highland Burma*, Edmund R. Leach, Athlone Press, London, 1970.**

SUGGESTED READING: REPORTS

Many NGOs and international organizations put out reports related to Burma. The following are several reports that offer useful information and analysis. These reports are available through the organizations that produced them.

Burma Ethnic Research Group, **Forgotten Victims of a Hidden War: Internally Displaced Karen in Burma**, 1998

A detailed study of displacement of ethnic Karen populations in civil war zones.Contact

Images Asia, **No Childhood at All: Child Soldiers in Burma**, 1997

Investigates the recruitment of children into Burma's armed forces.

Images Asia, **Migrating With Hope: Burmese Women Working in the Sex Industry**, 1997

Images Asia & Karen Human Rights Group, **All Quiet on the Western Front? – The Situation in Chin State and Sagaing Division**, 1998

Investor Responsibilty Research Center [Wasington, DC], **Multinational Business in Burma (Myanmar)**, 1998

Regularly updated guide to businesses investing in Burma.

Human Rights Watch Asia, **Unwanted and Unprotected: Refugees in Thailand**, 1998

Examination of the role of the Thai government and the UNHCR in the treatment of refugees who have fled from Thailand to Burma.

Moe K. Tun, **The 1997 Offensives**, Burma Issues, 1998

Details and analysis of the military offensives on remaining insurgent-held areas of southern Karen State during 1997.

Shan Human Rights Foundation, **Dispossessed: Forced Relocation and Extrajudicial Killings in Shan State**, 1998

PROPAGANDA: ANOTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

Our Karen people were the first to arrive in the land that is now known as Burma... Subsequently, the Mon imperialists entered, stole the Karen land... subjugated the Karen race. After the Mons, the chauvinist Burman race entered and fought the Mons, stole their territory and oppressed both they and the Karen race. The Burman chauvinist race have oppressed... our Karen race generation after generation.- Extract from speech by Karen National Union President General Saw Bo Mya on Karen Martyrs Day 1998 (KIC Newsletter, August 1998, p. 2)

In last month's newsletter I examined some aspects of Burma's state propaganda. While the state media is prominent, it is by no means exclusive. Across the political divide, propaganda plays an equally important role in defining and shaping organizational and social agendas. That article touched briefly on how material produced by government critics frequently offers little methodological distinction to that of their nemesis, and suggested the need for alternative approaches towards genuine solutions of Burma's problems. This article extends examination of anti-state propaganda to a pair of texts released by a single ethnic minority organization. In offering competing messages through distinct mediums, these pieces vividly demonstrate an ideological clash which will have to be addressed for the effective resolution of ethnic conflict in Burma.

The Karen Information Center (KIC) produces a monthly newsletter on behalf of the Karen National Union (KNU). The first pages of the December 1998 edition contain an English item entitled, "Durable Peace, Harmony and Prosperity in Burma (Feature article by New Guard)" (pp. 3-4). After a nutshell history of Burma from pre-colonialism to post-independence, the author concludes:

It is hoped that now, we are seeing the turn of events for better days. Moderation is on the rise and the yearning for peace and democracy is overwhelming. However, the Burman ultra-nationalists, the political dinosaurs in the form of militarists, are still entrenched in power... In a way, they are trying to wipe out the shame of colonialism by making war against [the] democratic and non-Burman ethnic forces, and to create a military empire, similar to the feudal empire of the old days, in order to perpetuate their hold on power. Their hallmark is extreme arrogance, bigotry and intolerance.

Our resistance for freedom and democracy, and our effort to put militarism in Burma in the garbage bin of history may still be hard and long. It is no time for us to relent and sit back. We must try to fully cooperate with the moderate Burman forces, ironing out the differences as opportunity occurs. The feudal empire of Burma belongs to history, and we must keep it there. For durable peace, ethnic harmony and prosperity, we must continue to make the greatest effort to build a genuine Federal Union of Burma based on democracy, equality and self-determination, for all the ethnic peoples in the union.

Immediately following, the newsletter contains a text in Sgaw Karen entitled, "[KNU] President General Saw Bo Mya's Speech on Karen New Year, Karen Year 2738, first day of Th'lay; 18 December 1998" (p. 5). Having offered his greetings for the day, the General continued:

Our Karen race has been oppressed under the Burman chauvinist system and we have been dominated by the chauvinist Burmans and forced into slavery for generations- so our race has been impoverished and unable to progress. The Burman chauvinists oppression of us has not only been during this generation. It began in the ancient times of Burman kings... The Burman imperialists persecuted, murdered and tortured our people just as [happens] now. Therefore, our entire Karen race must unite as one together under our KNU guidance, and strive together so that our Karen race will regain our Karen [birth] right. The KNU is an organization which loves justice, and stands steadfastly so that the entire Karen race will be freed from the bonds of slavery. The KNU leaders stand unwaveringly for the entire Karen race, and will absolutely never accept surrender to the evil SPDC dictatorship. [We] will work until Karen independence is regained. Our Karen dignity is our Karen country. If we have no country, we have not a scrap of dignity, and people do not recognize us as a single race.

To all our people-

United resist, so that our race will regain freedom. Together oppose this evil enemy united and bravely under the guidance of the Karen National Union. United, we're indivisible; indivisible we're fearsome; fearsome, we'll get our country.

Presumably the two pieces are intended for the benefit of mutually exclusive audiences, as both the medium and message of each are so startlingly juxtaposed. The first espouses federalist ideology through an international language, the second an ethnic-nationalist ideology through a minority language. These two contrasting characteristics define both the perceived audiences and their presumed collective psyches. Their inherent contradictions, while self evident, are indicative of greater realities deserving of serious recognition before Burma's people will have any hope of solving their intricate problems.

To write in the language of any ethnic minority group is an action consciously defining a relatively narrow audience, probably with specific cultural and geographic characteristics. Burmese being the lingua franca of Burma, few people are literate in ethnic minority languages outside of their own. Use of minority vernacular keeps a message "in the family." In this case, namely among the tens of thousands of ethnic minority civilians living in frontier regions or displaced across national borders. Subject to random abuse by aggressive government military forces, lacking alternatives, ethnic minorities are co-opted into a system and mindset of assumed authority through common lineage. Populations in these areas, mostly rural dwellers having little interaction with people from outside their own social group, are not informed about "moderate Burmans," let alone "federalism." What they are made to understand is the singular existence of an indivisible trinity formed between ethnicity, land and organizational leadership. Inherent in this paradigm is anti-Burmanism, absolute independence and rejection of anything potentially undermining the presumed authority of ethnic powers-that-be over their respective masses. The steady encroachment of an unrelentingly hostile enemy and an equally unforgiving nationalist propaganda line reinforce one another. The propaganda aims to re-assert givens, not revise, update or introduce new arguments. Like the state media, it dominates a collective psyche and crowds out alternative paradigms.

In contrast, the English article by nature assumes a wide and culturally non-specific audience. Readers may belong to an almost infinite array of backgrounds. Without regard to nationality, culture or social standing, anyone with the prerequisite English language skill can enjoy this material. And as the medium is inclusive, so too is the content. Federalism is the ideological inverse of ethnic nationalism. Where nationalism demands sectarianism, federalism embodies pluralism. Nationalism prioritizes defense, federalism seeks coexistence. The contrast could hardly be greater. Yet just as the material is broadly inclusive, so to is it specifically exclusive. One thing the writer of the article may be relatively sure of is that the very group to whom the local language ma-

terial is singularly addressed will be excluded from sharing the writer's message through the international language. All but a few among those thousands of civilians in the ethnic frontier lands will have the ability to read this material, just as few from the outside can appreciate the message in the local vernacular directed specifically to them.

This point is of great importance in reaching some understanding of the ethnic-militarist struggle in Burma and its relationship to the broader propaganda agenda. People across that country are trapped within militarist-nationalist paradigms, mostly variations upon the same themes. Yet a *federalist–nationalist* models are pedaled by the same organizations across other stages, in an attempt to simultaneously maintain domestic power-bases while offering olive branches to like-minded opposition groups. Out of perceived political and military necessities, the people are versed in hard-line ideology, while the policy makers, movers and shakers, dabble in theoretical experiments of social cohesion through said principles of ethnic equality and mutual respect.

Within this propaganda dynamic, the messages lie in the mediums, and between the two lies an ideological chasm. And yet this need not, indeed *ought not* be. Top-down designs for political change will not move a society forward. Federalist banter itself will not result in genuine progress. Any group truly committed to durable peace, ethnic harmony and prosperity in Burma must first recognize that salvation lies in opening a role in the leadership process to their own people. Such a process does not involve smothering propaganda and withering rhetoric. It requires, firstly, the cessation of media conceived through narrow nationalist mindsets. It demands the building of alternative participatory models, bare of propaganda devices. It means giving the people rights to take control of their own lives and to build a movement around themselves. Ultimately, it calls for the acceptance of a single fact, that past, present and future, the people of Burma are just that – the people of Burma. As a collective whole, side by side, the people themselves can and must be the ones to take control of the process by which to live in peace.

❖ *nyah phay thwet*

PRIVATIZATION OF RICE PRODUCTION?

Making up 80% of Burma's food supply and between 1/3 and 1/4 of the annual GDP, paddy rice is the cornerstone of both private and economic life in Burma. November 1998 estimates by the government of Burma that it would export a total of 100,000 metric tons of rice for the year with an estimated trade value of U.S. $23 million, making rice an important foreign currency earner for the cash-strapped regime.[1] However, these figures, even though a substantial increase over 1997's export number of 14,000 metric tons, fall far short of the export peak for rice from Burma during the British colonial era, and its regarded potential . Over the last several years the government has repeatedly stressed the importance of rice production and export, and has instituted a wide range of reforms and development projects to improve rice production.

In 1996 the government put forth a goal of exporting three million metric tons of rice by 2001, a feat to be achieved through a U.S. $7.33 billion irrigation program.[2] While irrigation projects remain part of the overall crop-production development process, weather difficulties and the South East Asian econmic crisis, among other factors, have led to more modest proposals for raising exports to 1 million metric tons during the 1999/2000 rice growing season.[3] Previous efforts by the government to increase the amount of rice available for export by instituting market reforms in the purchase of rice paddy from farmers proved impossible to maintain and were scrapped.[4] Attempts to introduce double cropping and chemical fertilizers have also often failed on the local level, due to the lack of needed capital.[5] Current policy changes are focussed on privatization of the rice industry.

At the March 26th commissioning of a new 250-ton rice mill, SPDC Secretary 3, Lt-Gen Win Myint, extolled the virtues of privatization: "As national entrepreneurs, who have capital and technology, are investing in the sector, production will increase and this will develop the industrial and trade sectors based on the agricultural sector."[6] One planned major privatization project is the 94,000-acre Nyaungdon island in the Irrawaddy Delta, that has been set aside for investors to grow rice on. After selling 50% of their harvest to the government at near market prices, investors will be free to export the remainder.[7] Large plots of this land will for 20-year leases for both domestic and foreign investors.[8]

Many international experts, however, believe that Burma's privatization plans will fail, as have many past government rice production projects. Participants in an international rice conference held during November 1998, in Thailand, said that the lack of infrastructure and ambiguous government policy could doom planned privatization. In the past, Burma's government policy with regards to paddy acquisition and its ongoing civil war have seriously compromised attempted reforms. While the government is dependent on rice-production, rice is being burned in ethnic areas as part of the Army's ongoing "four-cuts" program to remove support for insurgent groups. Attempts in late 1997 by the government to do away with the requisite sale of a certain number baskets of paddy per acre to officials at below market price were also thwarted. When an option was given for farmers to be able to sell their rice to either the government or dealers at near-market value farmers lacked a sense of obligation to sell rice to the government. When this spelled a potential shortage in the rice needed by the government to maintain the armed forces and government workers, the quota system was reintroduced. In the past, when push has come to economic shove, Burma's government has acted in it's own immediate interest over the economic interests of its people.

Burma's poor infrastructure also presents major problems for privatization projects. Burma lacks fertilization systems, irrigation pumps and modern drying facilities that are required for large scale rice-farming. Modern techniques used in the United States and Australia, where 200-acre tracts of land are seeded by aircraft and harvested by tractors, have never been used in Asia. According an executive of Malaysia's rice monopoly corporation currently looking into investing in Burma: "The greatest difficulty will be getting the full supply chain working. You may plant great rice in the world's best soil. But if you can't mill, polish and export efficiently the project will fail."[9]

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1 "Burma Sees Hope in Rice," International Herald Tribune, 2 November 1998.
2 "Burma Rice Exports to Triple by 2001: Irrigation Works Key," Dow Jones News, 22 April 1996
3 "Myanmar's Efforts to Boost its Rice Production," Reuters, 30 October 1998.
4 See Burma Issues, "Rice Reforms?," July 1998.
5 See Burma Issues, "Summer Rice and the Difficulties of Karenni's Farmers," October 1998.
6 "250-ton Rice Mill Opened to Hail Armed Forces Day," The New Light of Myanmar, 27 March 1999.
7 "Burma Sees Hope in Rice."
8 "Myanmar's Eforts to Boost its Rice Production."
9 "Burma Sees Hope in Rice."

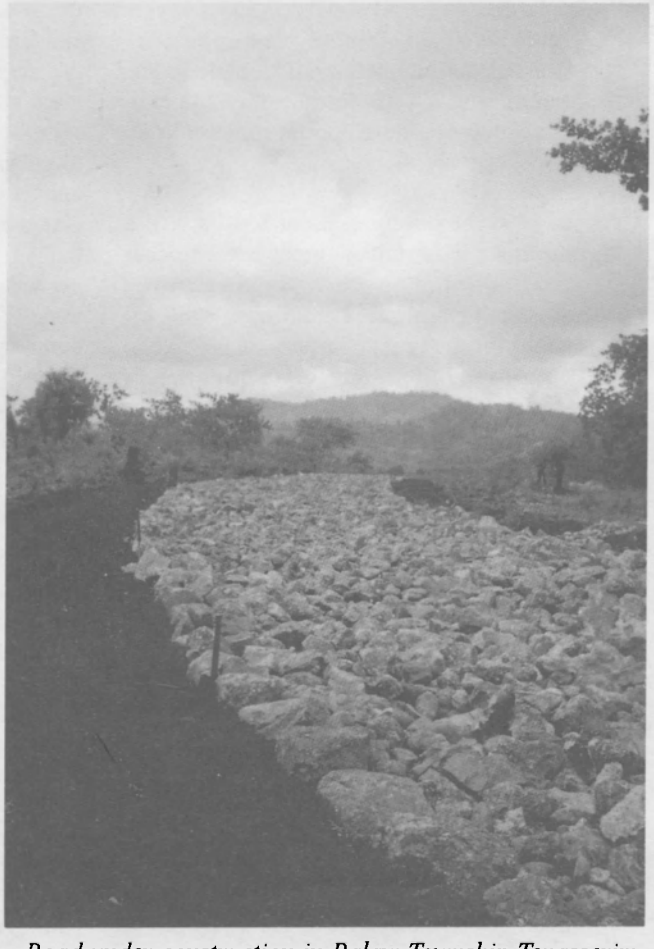
ROAD TO NOWHERE?

"The Secretary-1 said that [between 1989 and May 1997] 2,039 miles of dirt roads, 831 miles and one furlong of gravel roads and 110 miles and six furlongs of asphalt roads were paved and 6,804 miles of roads were repaired. Thirty-one large and 653 small bridges and six suspension bridges built on these roads during the period, spending altogether K[yats] 1098.96 million." – The New Light of Myanmar, 13 June 1997.

As important as roads are to a nation, pavement and pathways are hardly the stuff of great drama. When roads do make the news, what we hear about are the events associated with them. Thus, Burma human rights monitors report on the brutal human rights abuses associated with roadbuilding, news articles report deals struck between the government and international companies.

Though they may be attended by less ceremony or immediate suffering, the most significant effects of a new road do not materialize until long after the road itself ceases to be news. Roads can powerfully transform the economic and political climate of any place they touch. They make the world smaller, and in doing so they can build fortunes or carry them away. They may change the ethnic or class composition of some communities, and disperse others completely. Burma's government is building roads of every description throughout Burma. However, in Burma's rough current climate, these roads promise to carry the benefits of development to the hands of only a few, leaving the majority as bad off, or worse, than they were before.

Most development experts and international organizations maintain that the well –planned development of roads and other infrastructure is an essential part of economic progress for 'least-developed' countries. Burma has some of the worst infrastructure in Asia – it would be hard to argue that Burma doesn't need more and better roads. However, when the junta builds roads, it naturally has its own interests at heart. To maintain power, government needs to maintain strict control over the activities of its citizens, while somehow allowing them enough space to make the money that it needs to keep military and bureaucracy together. It's a delicate balance, and roads are tricky projects in that regard. Compared to other types of development – tourist hotels or coffee plantations, for instance - the benefits of a road can in theory be fairly democratic, accruing to everyone who uses it. Freedom for many means the freedom to travel. It's hard to lock up a road to keep out the undesirables. By using regulations, tariffs, trade agreements, and military force, however, the junta does its best.



Road under construction in Palaw Township Tenasserim Division where forced labor is being used, BI 1998

One of the clearest examples of how it has tried to do this is in its trade policy. In the late 1980's, Burma's government shifted from total economic isolation to limited engagement with its neighbors. It began a new phase of infrastructure development, opened new border trade routes and in 1989 threw the diplomatic and trade doors wide open to China. Opening routes to cross-border trade was a strategically beneficial move for the government in its ongoing civil war with ethnic insurgent groups. Much cross-border trade now bypassed these groups, cutting them from an important source of income. New arms shipments from China also certainly helped the government's situation.

Roads can be traveled in both directions, however, and Burmese goods and currency have tended to flow out of the country on the same routes at a faster rate than imports have been brought in, despite some extreme and even naive measures on the part of the government to prevent this [Gerald Roberts, "Trouble ahead for Burma," The Nation, 25 Feb. 1998. See also Burma Issues,"Burma's Dilemma: Back & forth over border trade," Sep. 1998.]. Indeed, the government's continual challenge has been to direct traffic on its roads – to control what travels, and to whose benefit.

Strategic and military routes require a different kind of traffic control. As the Burma Army moves in to "pacify" an area, it builds roads. In many remote areas of Burma, a[illegible] creasing number of rural roads criss-cross former insurgent held zones. Free travel on these roads is a right restricted to the Burmese military. When local civilians travel they must typically pay for 'passes' and take their chances. In other areas, roads are guarded to ensure they are not used by insurgents. In border areas people are forced to guard roads, watching for bandits and rebel soldiers.

Where government forces leave off, the forces of capitalism and local corruption take over, making travel difficult if not impossible for Burma's poor. In border areas, armed groups of every variety set up "toll" checkpoints where they charge [illegible]eling taxes for the right to pass. In other areas, government officials or even private development companies may collect fees for the use of a road. To avoid such artitrary taxation, the poor find other ways movement such as traveling along rural pathways.

Even if many poor and less powerful citizens are effectively barred from using new roads, their construction and presence is likely to impact people's lives in numerous ways. Road construction and repair remain one of the most common uses of local forced labor. Once built, the government uses new roads to help establish various means of control: local military and administrative offices are established, government schools are opened operating under a centralized curriculum. Constant government presence also

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NEWS BRIEFS

Than Shwe visits Thailand

On March 8, Senior General Than Shwe, head of Burma's military government, became the first Burmese leader to visit Thailand since the pro-democracy crackdown in 1988. Illicit drug issues topped the agenda of the meeting between the Than Shwe and Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, held in Chiang Rai in close proximity to the 'Golden Triangle.' During the meeting the Burmese contingent, which included military intelligence chief Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt and David Abel, visited the Doi Tung crop substitution project. Introduction of cop alternative's to opium????? Officials from the project were invited to Rangoon to help advise Burma's officials on a similar program. The Doi Tung project chairman quoted Khin Nyunt as saying a similar crop substitution effort should be implemented in Doi Muoi, Shan State. At the close of the meeting the two leaders pledged further cooperation through the formation of a joint anti-narcotics committee and Prime Minister Chuan accepted an open-ended invitation to visit Burma. However, there remains some conflict over approach, Than Shwe stressing that it will take a long time to resolve the problems and the Thai leader wanting to deal immediately witn the drug factories along the border that are flooding his country's markets with amphetamines.

Despite efforts by the Thai government to keep logistics of the meeting under wraps, protestors met Burmese leaders both in Bangkok and later in Chiang Rai. Representatives from the Overseas National Students' Organization of Burma held a protest outside of the Thai Government House where they submitted a letter calling for Thailand to support the formation of a democratic government in Burma. Forum-Asia, an umbrella organization of regional human rights and development groups, called for the Chuan government to pressure Burma to hold tripartite dialogue between the government, the National League for Democracy and ethnic minority groups. The group also pushed for ASEAN to lead Burma towards accepting practices related to human rights and democracy, instead of allowing the military junta to use the grouping to enhance their image and legitimacy.

Bangkok Post, 9 March 1999.
The Nation, 9 March 1999.

Armed Forces Day Anniversary

The state-run newspaper The New Light of Myanmar reported that a parade of 9 army columns, cheered by 20,000 people marched from Myoma Ground to Resistance Park, March 27th in celebration of the 54th anniversary of Armed Forces Day. In a speech at Resistance Park, Than Shwe talked of the importance of a strong and modern armed forces and urged soldiers to be diligent, hardworking and patriotic.

Included in the speech was a call to rebel groups to enter into truces with the government. In a statement from General Bo Mya the following day, the Karen National Union president said that his group would instead step up fighting until Rangoon held triparite talks with Aung San Suu Kyi and himself.

The NewLight of Myanmar, 28 March 1999
The Nation, 30 March 1999

Prisoners as Porters

According to a Thai border source, Burmese authorities have dispatched hundreds of prisoners from prisons in Moulmein, Thanton and Migale to join local villagers as porters in the Burma miltary's on-going dry-season offensives against the ethnic insurgent Karen National Union (KNU). The porters are forced to carry large weapons, ammunition, and food supplies for military units along the Thai-Burma border opposite the Thai districts of Mae Sot, Mae Ramat and Tha Song Yang in Tak province. Thai security forces caught 14 Burmese villagers fleeing from forced portering into Tha Song Yang who confirmed that at least 200 prisoners had been deployed as porters in that area.

Rangoon is reported to have plans to deploy 6,000 troups from the Southeastern force and the 22nd and 44th divisions to attack all of the remaining KNUstrongholds opposite Tak by the end of this dry season. One source reported that Burmese troops had seized the KNU's 7th division headquarters in Ta Doh Thu Ta from 200 rebels under the leadership of Gen Htay Maung.

Bangkok Post, 13 March 1999

ASEAN-EU meeting agreement

After several cancelations of the ministerial meeting between the European Union and the ASEAN due to disagreements over Burma's attendance, German ambassador to Thailand, Herman Erath, announced that the two blocs would meet May 26-28 in Bangkok. Burma and Laos, however, will be limited to the role of observer, and not permitted to speak. The two groups decided that there was room for discussion despite problems with Burma, he said. The EU has continued to uphold a visa ban on Burma's top officials.

Bangkok Post, 1 April 1999

Continued from page 6

presents new opportunities for taxation, bribery and corruption by local authorities.

A new rural route in Burma is also likely to shift the economic climate against the poorest and least powerful, by opening areas to exploitation by wealthy speculators. Roads improve access to forests or farmland, and at the same time significantly increase the value of adjacent land. Land grabbing and speculation along roadsides, both by government officials and by wealthy businessmen is reported to be widespread in Burma, particularly in lowland farming areas. In some cases, farmers have been dispossessed by local government officials, who in turn sell roadside land to speculators. In others, businessmen use fraud, debt, or threats to obtain desired land from farmers at discount prices. New mountain roads make upland communities, mostly ethnic minority groups, vulnerable to speculation of a different sort, as loggers and miners move in to strip their land of its valuable resources. Local citizens are no match for the power and money that such businessmen represent – there is often little they dare do to prevent the forest from being felled around them, or their farmland from being taken over by wealthy developers. Even if Burma's legal system clearly established land and property rights, which it does not, most poor lack the education, the experience, and connections to legally defend their rights.

In Burma's current climate, even development projects as ordinary as roads may bring as many risks to the poor as they do opportunities to the rich. The problems that development can bring to the most marginalized members of any society, in Burma are increased by the alienating and divisive civil war. If increasing injustice is to be avoided, potential development projects need to consider not only the physical and economic needs of individual communities affected, but they must also take into account the local and national power structures that may affect people's ability to take advantage of these projects. After all, the challenge for all development should be not only to generate wealth and benefits for as many as possible – but also to make changes that leave no one poorer or more marginalized than they were before.

❖ Emily Zeamer

The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"As a business entity, we must remain apolitical in all countries where we operate. Foreign relations activities are best conducted through international diplomatic channels, not private companies. U.S. corporations cannot be instruments of foreign policy or serve the agendas of political interest groups. In fact, U.S. law and our corporate Code of Conduct specifically prohibit us from asserting ourselves in the internal politics of any sovereign nation." *David M. Garcia, Senior Public Relations Representative, UNOCAL corp., responding to a question regarding UNOCAL's involvement in the Yadana gas pipeline project*

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"We are not in any way imposing our values on others. It is instead an effort to improve the implementation of international standards for human rights and to contribute to peaceful and lasting development around the world and in Asia," *German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer at the 2nd Asia - Europe meeting held in Berlin March 29, after the Asean - EU meeting was canceled due to disagreements over the conditions of attendance by Burma's officials*

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"I was here one year ago in May with the Thai authorities, and it was agreed that this group would be moved because it is a terribly destroyed mess of a camp. I come back now, and they haven't been moved," *Dennis McNamara, UNHCR division director of international protection, on the slow progress by Thai authorities to relocate refugees in Huay Kaloke refugee camp, located dangerously close to the border, which was attacked and burned in early 1998*

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"The bottom line is: Thailand's problems, in particular the disputes over land and water with Burma, will remain unchanged as long as the regime is in power, because it has no desire to treat Thailand as an equal. Despite the seemingly succesful trip of the Burmese foreign minister, it is unlikely that the junta will depart from its usual position. Without convincing the regime to introduce positive reform, Thailand's attempts to bring Burma to the fore will prove futile." *Aung Naing Oo, foreign affairs secretary of the All Burma Students Democratic Front on recent overtures by Burma towards dialogue with Thailand*

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"The flexibility of this global economy allows the overall system to link up everything that is valuable according to dominant values and interests, while disconnecting everything that is not valuable, or becomes devalued. It is this simultaneous capacity to include and exclude people, territories, and activities, that characterizes the new global economy as constituted in the information age." *Manuel Castells, author of "The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture," in an opening address at a U.N. conference on Information Technologies and Social Development*

BURMA ISSUES
PO BOX 1076
SILOM POST OFFICE
BANGKOK 10504
THAILAND

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AIR MAIL