KAOWAO NEWS NO. 149

Newsletter for social justice and freedom in Burma
February 25 – March 15, 2009

Readers’ Front

Burma: Tortured Victim flees labour camp

Wa continue to resist census taking

Mon Women’s Day Held In Canada

Villagers In Mon Stronghold Area Receive ID

Migrant Workers heading back home to Burma

Villagers forced into forming People’s Militia

Displaced Villagers Flee to Border

Selfless Side Of Humans Can Overcome Crisis

*************************************************************************

Readers' Front

Dear readers,

We invite comments and suggestions on improvements to Kaowao newsletter. With your help, we hope that Kaowao News will continue to grow to serve better the needs of those seeking social justice in Burma. And we hope that it will become an important forum for discussion and debate and help readers to keep abreast of issues and news. We reserve the right to edit and reject articles without prior notification. You can use a pseudonym but we encourage you to include your full name and address.

Regards,

Editor
Kaowao Newsgroup
ditor@kaowao.org
www.kaowao.org
Burma: Tortured Victim flees labour camp

Kaowao: March 15, 2009

Many people have been wrongly charged by the SPDC according to an ex-prisoner who recently fled from an illegal labour camp.

“About 80% of the prisoners in this camp were innocent and were charged with misconduct and threatened with beatings and torture.” said Mr. Aung Myo Paing (aka) Nai Asha from Ye Township. Aung Myo Paing was sentenced by the local authorities in Ye and later sent to Ingapo Labour Camp, Kyaik Hto Township in Mon State.

According to Aung, there are about 200 people being held at the Ingapo Labour Camp including 18 Buddhist monks who took part in the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma. “Even though these monks were disrobed without their consent, they still practice their religion as Buddhist monks. Most of the monks are Arakanese and Burmese nationals,” added Aung. When the SPDC arrested these monks they charged them as drug criminals not as political activists to defame their dignity.

Aung Myo Paing from Yan Myo Aung of Ye Township said he was picked up on February 2, 2007 and subsequently charged by Daw Cho Cho Mar, the judge from Moulmein, for illegally trading in teak timber. Describing the events that led to his arrest, he had no contact with the local SPDC, but had been actively involved in community development initiatives and had his own business after returning home from Singapore. He had given scholarships to poor children with his own money and shown no interest in joining the USDA. This led him to be put under suspicion by the local SPDC authorities who later arrested him and charged him with illegal trading. He was interrogated by the Moulmein District Police Force headed by U Khin Aung where he was beaten several times and suffered from physically injuries.

“I was interrogated mostly late at night when they (policemen) were drunk and tortured me until I signed a confession. I met many prisoners who were wrongly charged like me. Many of the convicts were charged with gambling underground lottery (Che-Thee) and drug abuse.

Aung Myo Paing was later transferred to a labour camp but he paid one million Kyat in bribe money to be put in the kitchen at the labour camp. (The kitchen team is exempt from hard labour and they do not have to work in the rubber plantation and are not chained.) He fled to Thai border from the labour camp and has just arrived in Malaysia with the help of some friends.

Burmese democracy activist Ms. Khin Ohmar said before the Saffron demonstrations in 2007 there were about 1,100 political prisoners, now that has doubled to about 2,100.
Wa continue to resist census-taking

S.H.A.N: 11 MARCH 2009

Latest reports from the Sino-Burma border say the United Wa State Army (UWSA) is still refusing entry to census takers coming from Kengtung, the capital of Shan State East.

A team of 27 government officials who arrived on the Wa border checkpoint Kho-Hsoong on 26 February were forced to return to Kengtung.

Col Than Tut Thein, G1 from Kengtung-based Triangle Region Command, was dispatched to Panghsang, the Wa headquarters last week. “He returned empty-handed on 6 March after spending two days in Panghsang,” said an officer from the Wa’s closest ally National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS), commonly known as the Mongla group by the name of its main base.

Meeting Col Sai Hsarm, Commander of the UWSA’s Mongpawk-based 468th Brigade on his way back, he had reportedly stressed on two points:

- To inform Kengtung as soon as Panghsang is ready to admit census officials
- Not be swayed by exile media “trying to bring the two sides on a head-on collision course”

Tension between the UWSA and the Burma Army has been high since the beginning of the year. According to the Wa’s own estimates, they are being besieged by at least 50 Burma Army infantry battalions.

Mongla, on the other hand, has permitted junta officials to conduct census in its domain, but refused to divulge the group’s own roster.

Local people meanwhile are skeptical about the process which is expected to last until the end of March. “They are taking back our white cards (temporary IDs issued before the May 2008 referendum) without issuing us a substitute in return,” said a villager.

A permanent ID is a pink card.

The ruling military generals are taking a nationwide census in preparation for the 2010 general elections. The New Mon State Party (NMSP) has also refused to provide information on its members and their families, reported Independent Mon News Agency (IMNA) yesterday.

******************************************************************************
Mon Women’s Day Held In Canada

Kaowao: March 10, 2009

Organized by women, the Mon Women’s Day was held at the Mon Temple in Calgary, Canada on Saturday, March 7, 2009.

Mon Women Organization (Canada) modestly celebrated the event with speeches by Chairperson Ms. Mi Yin Aye and Mon Canadian Society Chairperson Ms. Pyah Sorn followed by lunch.

The Mon Women’s Day was chosen to celebrate the birthday of Queen Shin Saw Pu, the only queen in Burmese history. Queen Shin Saw Pu (Mi Jao Bu) ruled Hongsawatoi Mon Kingdom or lower Burma from 1453 to 1472 and she was also famous for her effective governance.

A joint statement, released on March 7, 2009 by Mon women organizations from Thai-Burma border, Canada and USA called for the military regime to comply with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and to initiate a genuine tripartite dialogue for democratic reform and national reconciliation in Burma. The Mon women also called on the Burmese military regime to halt sexual violence against the ethnic women as a weapon of war. The raping, torturing and murdering of ethnic women is widespread in which thousands of women and children have become internally displaced persons and refugees as a result of human rights violations, land confiscations, and the economic oppression.

Several Mon women are active in community development, health and national education initiatives. However, only one woman, Ms. Mi Sadar has been elected as member of the Central Committee for the New Mon State Party.

“The Karen (KNU) has a woman leader as Secretary General post and women leaders such as Dr. Cynthia Maung, Khin Ohnmar and Nang Cham Tong are well-known among the ethnic and democratic forces. The Mon women need to strengthen their position,” said Oakar Mon, an activist based on Thai-Burma border.

Villagers In Mon Stronghold Area Receive ID

Kaowao: March 10, 2009

Local villagers located near the General Headquarters of NMSP were given state issued ID cards, Kaowao has learned.

The local Immigration and Population authorities issued ID cards to villagers from Panang Bein, Joo Khaprao, Suwunnabhum, Pasar and some NMSP members. About four thousand people in the core areas of the NMSP were given the cards according to an officer of the Party.
The Burmese authorities charged 2500 Kyats each and the process started from February 25, last month until March 5. Other villagers of NMSP’s stronghold area, Chedike, Hanee and Halan will be provided with the cards in the near future.

Nai Arot who received the new ID card said, “I am very happy for this and I hope there will be less trouble when we travel to Ye and other areas. In the past, we were extorted or threatened at the check point (White Bridge Gate near Ye) for not having an ID.”

Most people in the urban areas have state issued ID cards while many ethnic nationalities in the rural (black zone) are not given one. The Burmese authorities often conduct surprise checks late in the night to examine ID or household registration lists. If someone is found residing in a particular home and is not on the list they are likely to be arrested.

A source from Ye said the ID program also aims to prepare the civilians to vote in the next general election in 2010. However, during the referendum for the Constitution in May 2008, this Panang Bein area voted in favour of the Constitution only 27 out of 4000.

Migrant Workers heading back home to Burma

Kaowao: March 8, 2009

The global financial crisis has begun to hit Thailand, forcing several migrant workers to return home to Burma.

According to a Thai police source at the Three Pagodas Pass border town, from 50 to 100 migrant workers are crossing over from this border check point every day. Many return trips are arranged by service agents who issue permit letters from their employers and immigration authorities.

Migrant workers pay varying fees depending on their destination, those who come from southern Thailand or Malaysia border pay about 4500 Baht, those from Surat pay 3500 Baht and those who come from Maharchai or Bangkok pay 3000 Baht.

“Many employers do not want to hire us. The rubber price has gone down 40 Baht per pound from 90 Baht and the wages are much lower. Many migrant workers living with their families on rubber plantation are often robbed and killed by local Thai Muslim gangs,” says Nai Gone of Pong Join village, Zobbu Township who came from southern Thailand.

“We suffer from discrimination by the local people and even the Thai media reports negatively about us. In this global downturn, the government program is only for local Thais and we are being thrown out,” Chan Ong, a migrant community leader from Bangkok said.
“The border area is busy with many people crossing back and forth. While many migrants are heading back home, others are entering Thailand because the situation is not good in Burma. There are no employment opportunities and human right violation continues,” said a villager from Halockanee Mon refugee camp.

Most migrant workers from Burma work in the fishing, construction and rubber plantation industries. Thailand has just announced that 1 million jobs are likely to be lost in the next 12 months adding that 500,000 foreign work visas and work permits would not be renewed for 2010.

According to a joint UN and ASEAN statement, on February 17, the effect of the economic downturn was not limited to job losses for foreign workers. It was also resulting in an increase in protectionist government policies aimed at clamping down on illegal migration, making foreign workers particularly vulnerable to exploitative work and unfair labour conditions and limiting their ability to access health and legal services.

************************************************************

Villagers forced into forming People’s Militia

Kaowao: March 8, 2009

The Burma Army is forcing villagers in southern Mon State to form Pyithu-Sit or People's Militia, a local armed group controlled by the military.

A recruitment order from the Sakakha 19 (Military Operation Command 19), was given to the village headmen of Sinku (Changu in Mon), southern Ye Township. On this order, the local Mon villagers have to raise money for the militia operations including their salary, food allowance, and armed equipment and uniforms. The Sinku villagers have to buy 12 arms (6 Automatic Rifles AR 15/M-16 and 6 AK 47) and 45 mm pistols from the Burma Army.

“We are ordered to form 10 militias and every household has to share the cost. The village headman started collecting money from 5,000 to 100,000 Kyats per household,” said a villager who spoke under condition of anonymity.

Sinku village is comprised of over three hundred households and is located between Hangam and Khawza sub-town where Burma Army's Battalion No. 31 is based.

Mon villagers are reluctant to join the Pyithu-Sit because they do not want to be sandwiched between the BA and armed opposition groups.

Pyithu-Sit or People's Militia is notorious among the rural population for extortion and abuse of power. Its main role is to act as buffer for the BA and is used to guide the BA column in its military operations against armed groups. Most militiamen are retired soldiers from the BA or local poor men who are unemployed and unable to feed their families.
Displaced Villagers Flee to Border
Kaowao: February 25, 2009
Forced relocation continues to diminish the lives of local villagers in Tavoy District, southern Burma according to a refugee family newly arrived on the Thai-Burma border.

Since January of this year, sporadic fighting between the Burmese Army (BA) and Karen National Union (KNU) has left the rural villagers of Nyaung Done, Metta Sub-township effectively prisoners in their own village.

Permission was granted to leave by Lt. Col Ye Yint Naing of Infantry Battalion No. 103, however it was for just three days and was under extenuating circumstances – villagers had to complete their paddy harvest. Further, leave was only granted after a pig worth approximately 100,000 Kyat was offered to him.

These controlled movement restrictions and relocations are not new to the region; this time last year the Burmese Army forced Kami villagers to move into Nyang Done village and about 60 of 400 households were uprooted.

"Even though they (the Burmese Army) offer each household a plot of land to build a new house, we had to leave our old land and livelihood and try to make a new life. They don't allow us to return to our farms that some of us have spent so long cultivating and we face constant hurdles just to survive day-to-day. That is why we have to flee from our country to Thailand,” said the head of the refugee family.

The area they have fled from is located along the proposed route of the Asia Highway Kanchanaburi-Tavoy Road Project. The joint project by the Kyaw Lynn Naing Company and Kanchanaburi Tavoy Development (KTD) began in 1997, but has stalled due to the fighting between the BA and the KNU.

Brigade 55 and Marine Command of the BA and Brigade No. 4 of KNU were engaged in active fighting in the areas where 10 villages were relocated and 17 others were destroyed, effecting the rural population of approximately 7,000 people.

A further setback to people in the region is it’s marking as a ‘black area’ or killing zone; several villagers have been arrested, tortured or killed by the BA during military operations.
Selfless Side Of Humans Can Overcome Crisis

Mohammad Yunis interviewed by Tetsuo Kogure

The Asahi Shimbun: 10 March, 2009

The interlinked crises of food, finance and climate change illustrate the weaknesses of our current economic system. It is possible to integrate selflessness into a market long dominated by the selfish pursuit of profits, says Muhammad Yunus.

Tetsuo Kogure (TK): If we look back at what happened in 2008, one of the biggest events was the global financial crisis. It can be said that through excessive trust in the markets, businesses that focused only on profits have collapsed. What is your opinion?

Mohammad Yunis (MY): It happened so suddenly, but it showed that those who knew everything, understood everything, and were confident in themselves were not correct. So (despite) expertise in understanding the financial world itself, it showed that we do not have the capacity to understand those cases.

The big pillars of the financial system just collapsed, and that was not realized (even) by experts weeks ago. That was a shocking part of it; people were not aware of it.

And then (there are) the causes of this. Always everybody was given to believe that the market is supreme, that "invisible hands" solve everything in the best possible manner, and there was nothing to worry about.

The market doesn't solve everything.

In hindsight, they are saying that the reason is extreme greed, which led to the collapse. Or some say the marketplace has been used like a gambling casino. It's no longer business; it's gambling.

Everybody changed some fuzzy thing or built castles in the air. Those things didn't exist, but everybody was made to believe they were there.

Secondly, under globalization, you suffer in a way from something you have not done, so it's somebody else's mistake. Somebody else's greed makes everybody else suffer.

Another irony in the situation is that the richest people lose lots and lots of their money and wealth, but the guys who had a billion dollars still have half a billion dollars left. And once things go back to normal, they can get a billion dollars again.

But the 3 billion people at the bottom have been hit the hardest because they are losing their jobs, incomes and food now that the economy is slowing down, factories are closing, jobs are being cut. They are the ones whose lifestyles suffer the most in a physical and miserable way.
We are busy talking about bailout packages for the rich, billions of dollars, 700 billion for this, 300 billion for that, 200 billion for that. We are all busy making those bailout packages for the rich. But nowhere are we talking about bailout packages for the poor who are losing their jobs and so on. That is also an ironic situation.

One last thing I want to comment on is that we forgot that the financial crisis is just one of the crises in 2008. We forgot that in 2008, we had a food crisis. It was a massive food crisis, and it has not disappeared.

2008 is also the year of the energy crisis, when oil prices went up to $150 (a barrel) and so on. It has calmed down for a while, but the crisis has not disappeared; it is very much alive.

And one crisis that continued not only in 2008 but long before 2008 is the environmental crisis.

So this is a combination of these crises. These are not separate crises. In a way, they are interlinked with some connections. We have to see how we can redesign the whole system. This has to be done now.

TK: You said these four crises are interlinked. I think they are related to globalization and free markets. What do you think? Are you OK with globalization and free markets?

MY: Globalization is not something that somebody designed. Even if we go back hundreds of years, globalization was still in action. People were moving around from the beginning of globalization. We cannot change the process of globalization.

What we can do? How can we raise a question that doesn't ask the silly question of whether we should go for globalization or should we stop it.

The real question is "right globalization" or "wrong globalization." If we do not do anything about it, it will be wrong globalization. We have to make rules on the procedures of globalization so that we all agree. Because if we are all free players in globalization, then the biggest and the richest will take away all the gains in globalization. The weakest and smallest will get nothing.

If we gain from globalization that is desirable for everybody, we must ensure it's win-win for both sides in the picture.

In the beginning, we do not feel comfortable because you are rich. "Why should I live with you?" I am capable, I have the technology, money. I can do it. That is not how globalization survives.

Then it will become a kind of economic imperialism. You have the power, you take everything. You have money power instead of soldier power or military power. You use money power to take over. That's not a good thing. You colonize poor countries, you take over their economy because you have money.
Everybody has to have their place, a place of dignity. That is the right spirit of globalization.

And also the market is a good thing. But we are misusing the market. That's why I say we have to correct the economic system before we correct the financial market, because the financial system is an outcome of the economic system.

In the economic system today is the practice we call capitalism. We fundamentally misinterpret capitalism. The idea of capitalism means that we all have to be greedy people. We say business means business to make money. Profit maximization is the mission of business.

Because of this interpretation of capitalism, (we) assume human beings are machines, money-making machines. We put human beings in one dimension of the picture. We are all in one dimension on how to make money.

But at the same time, all people have a selfless part. There is the selfish part of human beings and the selfless part of human beings. But we have created a business world based on only the selfish part of human beings.

If we allowed the selfless part to be put in the marketplace, then the market becomes complete.

Why not create another kind of business to take care of the selfless part? We call it "social business."

One kind of business is to make money and enrich yourself financially. Another kind of business is social business, where you use your money to change the world, to solve the problems we see around us without any intention of personally gaining in a financial way.

We can have both of the businesses since we all have two aspects and we can participate in both businesses. Then the marketplace will be more balanced. Then we can create a business to adjust poverty, deal with the malnutrition of children, the health of women, housing for poor people, drinking water for everybody, environmental issues.

These all can be addressed in social business. Social businesses are non-loss, non-dividend companies with a social purpose.

We have created some of these companies in Bangladesh. One is the Grameen Danon (Food) company, which produces yogurt with all the micro-nutrients mixed in (and) sells it to malnourished children so that they regain their health. This company is not trying to make money for itself or for its owners. This company is trying to solve the malnutrition of children by joining as a business rather than as a charity.

TK: Social business is an unknown concept to the general public. You said it is a no-loss, no-dividend business working for social objectives. It needs capital investment, doesn't it? What is the basic mechanism?
MY: Investors first decide to use their money to address a particular problem, like drinking water. We have arsenic in drinking water in Bangladesh. I want to invest in drinking water so that people have safe water and don't have to suffer from drinking arsenic. That is my objective.

I put the money in, and running this business means people have to buy this water. I do not give it to them for free. The company covers all the costs but it makes a profit. But I will never take it because this is not my intention.

My intention is to make sure people have good drinking water. I can get back my investment money, but my satisfaction comes when I have saved the lives of people who had arsenic in their drinking water.

Somebody may ask why you do not make money. I say the selfless part of people will do it.

TK: What are the profits used for? To improve the business?

MY: Yes, exactly, so that the business will improve, expand. I started this when profits were made, used them to make it bigger and bigger.

Grameen Danon is the (social business) company and Grameen Veolia (Water) is another (social business) company. This is a water company. We have just started it. Veolia is a French company, the largest water company in the world.

We are creating more and more social businesses.

TK: Do these French companies take any profits?

MY: They do not take any profits. They are social businesses, and they agreed to our conditions and creating them. ... They can take back the investment money after a long period.

TK: Typical investors want to make profits. Do you think they are interested in a social business that makes no profit?

MY: Don't read books about it. Just rethink it for yourself. Now what I am saying is that instead of a charity, you can create a company and you can take your money back when you want to. So that is more powerful than giving it as charity.

All human beings have two aspects: a selfish aspect and a selfless aspect. That's why we are demonstrating in the streets when we see something happening, some bad things happening, that cannot be accepted.

What is wrong that prompts you to demonstrate? The police come and beat you up, but you still demonstrate because you want to speak out, because you feel that strong and devout selfless part of you. We want to change things we do not like. ... So when that spirit comes, then we will create social businesses.
TK: You have achieved a lot of success with your creation of Micro Finance. How do MF and social business interlink?

MY: They have strong links because MF came from the direction of something different from conventional business. We created Grameen Bank not to make myself rich. That was not the intention at all. I created GB to help poor people, to create self-employment, so that they can generate an income. My intention is to help people.

TK: In Asia, China and India are emerging as economic giants. They are growing amid globalization and the free market. Is it possible for them to eradicate poverty if they continue on the same course?

MY: In both India and China, the reduction of poverty is dramatic. China has brought poverty down, down down, quite similarly in India. So even (through) globalization and profit-maximization, (economic) growth has an effective impact on poverty levels.

But take the case in the United States, which is the richest country in the world. There are the rich, but there still are a lot of poor people. For example, in the United States, there are still millions of people who cannot afford health services because they are not covered by health insurances because they are all privatized.

In a private economy, poor people are left out. There are 47 million people in the United States without health insurance. This is an example (of what happens) if we follow the same procedure (of) existing capitalism. ... If the United States has 47 million, in India, there will be three times more because the population is three times as much, and in China, four times as much.

Unless we have this completed capitalism in which both sides--selfless part and selfish part--work together in the market, you will have this problem.

TK: Asian people have had a kind of tradition or wisdom of a so-called sustainable economy, self-efficient economy, something like that. How can this tradition be used to eradicate poverty?

MY: It is very important. Those elements are still in our culture. This is also an element of selflessness. In the United States, that part has been eliminated.

In a formal economic sense, if you have social business, you could express this aspect. Our selflessness is (expressed) much more effectively than among people in the United States. This is the beauty of Eastern society. We have those values that are very strong even today.

This tradition is very useful for social business. Because we care about our family, we say that family is the smallest unit. Then we feel for the community ... and want to come back to our villages when we retire .... This is our feeling. You want to sacrifice your life to help people in your nation. This is very strong in Asian tradition. It is very helpful.
TK: What do you expect from Japan, Japanese companies, NGOs and people?

MY: I explained what social business is. They can play a very important role. French people can do social business, even Germans can do social business. I am sure that Japanese will do it in a more effective way because they understand what it is.

Today, they are one-dimension business people who see money, stock markets and nothing else. If they take off their profit-maximizing glasses and put on social-business glasses, they would see a completely different world.

Japanese companies have corporate social responsibility funds. They can use this money for creating social business instead of just using this money as charity. All these things can be very neatly done.

Muhammad Yunis is a Bangladeshi economist and managing-director of the Grameen Bank. He is the winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, and has devised a "microcredit" system that extends unsecured, small-amount loans for the poor.