

15th Annual Edition

BURMA

HUMAN RIGHTS YEARBOOK 2008



Preface

The Human Rights Documentation Unit (HRDU) began monitoring the human rights situation in Burma 15 years ago with the publication of the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook 1994*. Since that time, the HRDU has continued to monitor and document the human rights situation in Burma, culminating in this present report, the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook 2008*. Indeed, this current report represents the 15th annual instalment of the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook* series. Collectively, the *Burma Human Rights Yearbooks* embody the most complete historical account of the human rights situation in Burma over those past 15 years. To date, the HRDU has published over 10,000 pages of highly detailed human rights documentation. Together, the *Burma Human Rights Yearbooks* present an unparalleled and unbroken historical record of the systematic and egregious nature of the human rights abuses committed by the military regime and its allied ceasefire armies spanning the past one and a half decades, and as such will be of paramount importance following the eventual democratization of Burma and the convening of a truth commission or transitional justice program to hold the perpetrators to account for their actions.

Few organizations working to document human rights in Burma, or indeed anywhere in the world for that matter, can boast such a comprehensive body of work. While most organizations working on human rights issues in Burma limit the scope of their work to a particular thematic issue, ethnic group or geographic area, the HRDU, through the publication of the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook*, addresses the full gamut of human rights abuses being perpetrated in all areas across the country. Similarly, few other organizations working to promote human rights in Burma can claim the longevity of the HRDU.

At 1,092 pages in length, comprised of approximately half a million words (excluding the endnote citations; of which there are over 4,800), this present publication, the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook 2008*, is the single largest, most comprehensive, most inclusive report ever produced by any organization in the world detailing the human rights situation in Burma.

This, however, in itself is no cause for celebration. Sadly, many of the issues examined in this current report remain the same as those discussed in the very first *Burma Human Rights Yearbook*, 15 years ago. The military remains firmly entrenched in power and wholesale oppression of the civilian population continues. Despite ongoing documentation activities, increased public awareness of human rights, repeated examples of public dissent and calls for reform, coupled with unprecedented levels of international awareness and condemnation of the situation in Burma, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military regime has persistently failed to address (or even listen to) the grievances of the general population.

Alas, the sheer size of this present report and the undeniable volume of evidence which comprises it, indicates that there has been little discernable improvement in Burma since the HRDU first began monitoring the situation 15 years ago.

The year 2008 proved to be yet another tumultuous year for the people of Burma. Not only did we witness the single most catastrophic natural disaster in the nation's history in the form of Tropical Cyclone Nargis which struck Burma's coastline on 2 May 2008 and claimed an estimated 140,000 lives in the process, we also saw the extent of the regime's malevolence manifested through its near-complete lack of response to the tragedy. Though an estimated 2.4 million people had been adversely affected by the cyclone, approximately one million of whom had been displaced, the junta scarcely lifted a finger. Even when the international community was beating on the door with generous offers of relief and assistance for those affected, the SPDC actively prevented the provision of aid. Offers were turned down and visas for aid workers were rejected. It was not until the junta's obstruction of the aid effort was equated with Crimes Against Humanity, that international aid organizations were allowed in, although even then, they were still denied access to some of the worst affected areas.

Still, the SPDC announced its intention to move ahead with its planned constitutional referendum scheduled to take place on 10 May 2008, just over a week after the cyclone had struck and while the vast majority of cyclone survivors had still yet to receive any form of aid whatsoever. Reports soon emerged of cyclone survivors being evicted from emergency relief centres set up in schools, monasteries and community halls so that these spaces could be used as polling stations. By July 2008, the SPDC had prematurely closed almost all of the relief centres set up in Irrawaddy and Rangoon Divisions, ordering those who had been seeking refuge there back to their decimated villages despite UN estimates that aid would need to be provided for at least six months. The last two remaining aid centres in Labutta Township in Irrawaddy Division, one of the worst hit areas, were ordered shut on 10 August 2008. The displaced villagers were simply told that, "[t]he government has given you enough assistance and relief material so you must go back home". Meanwhile, an estimated 20,000 square miles of farmland remained inundated with salt water.

The only respite that the SPDC offered cyclone survivors was to postpone the referendum for two weeks in the worst affected areas. All other areas were still force to vote on 10 May 2008. However, before these communities were able to even cast their votes, on 15 May 2008, the SPDC announced that the constitution had been "*overwhelmingly approved*" with a referendum result of 92.4 percent in favour. Unsurprisingly, this result was met with widespread scepticism and condemnation of being little more than a sham designed to assure the military's continued grip on power.

Meanwhile, throughout the country, SPDC army soldiers continued to perpetrate widespread and egregious human rights violations against the civilian population. Thousands of reports emerged throughout the year detailing military involvement in cases of arbitrary arrest, torture and extra-judicial executions, rape, the use of forced labour, widespread deployment of antipersonnel landmines in civilian areas, the recruitment of child soldiers, the restriction of fundamental freedoms, the oppression of minority groups, deprivation of livelihood and the destruction of property, and complicity in the drug trade, all within a climate of near-complete impunity.

Sadly, such trends appear likely to continue. The approval of the constitution almost guarantees the military of their privileged position as a class unto itself. Moreover, the SPDC's frequently displayed intransigence for compromise or reform, and its apparent inability to demonstrate any form of common decency towards the civilian population of Burma, indicates that the coming year will only spell more of the same.

How many years and lives will it take to put a stop to these crimes? What will it take for the international community to stand behind the people of Burma and demand that these atrocities be put to a stop? Though the HRDU, and other grassroots organizations like us, have been bringing these abuses to the world's attention for the past 15 years, it must not be forgotten that the people of Burma have suffered under military rule and its concomitant human rights abuses for the past half a century. The time is long overdue to demand respect for human rights, justice and human dignity for the people of Burma. Enough is enough!

The Director
Human Rights Documentation Unit
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The Human Rights Documentation Unit (HRDU) is the research and documentation division of Burma's government in exile; the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). The HRDU was formed in 1994 to document the human rights crisis confronting the many and varied peoples of Burma, and to defend and promote those internationally recognised human rights that are inherent and inalienable for all persons irrespective of race, colour, creed, ethnicity or religion. To this end, the HRDU published the first *Burma Human Rights Yearbook* in 1995 to comprehensively document the systematic and egregious nature of the human rights abuses being perpetrated in Burma throughout the previous year. This report, the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook 2008*, represents the 15th annual edition of the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook*, which, combined with all previous editions collectively comprise well over 10,000 pages of documentation and provide an unbroken historical record spanning the past one and a half decades.

All editions of the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook* and all other reports published by the HRDU can be viewed online on the NCGUB website at <http://www.ncgub.net> as well as on the Online Burma Library at <http://www.burmalibrary.org>. Any questions, comments or requests for further information can be forwarded to the HRDU via email at enquiries.hrdu@gmail.com.

Human Rights Documentation Unit

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