CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT:
A Road to Reform?

INTERVIEW:
Aung San Suu Kyi

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE:
Discussing the Options
CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT: A Road to Reform?

The term constructive engagement was coined for the theory that it is more productive to maintain ties, particularly economic ties, with countries than to isolate them if one hopes to effect change. An event that clearly signals the growing popularity of this theory is the upcoming ministerial meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to be held in Thailand July 20-27. For the first time Burma has accepted an invitation to attend as guest of the host country. While Burma’s neighbors move to embrace constructive engagement, questions remain whether this approach will lead to true political, social or economic reform, and whether it serves the long term interests of Burma and the region.

THE INTERVIEW: Aung San Suu Kyi

The date July 20, 1989 will be known to many readers of this publication. It is the date Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest in her family home in Rangoon. She has been held since then under a 1975 law designed for “Safeguarding the State from Dangerous Subversive Elements.” This law was amended in August 1991 to extend the permissible time of detention without charge or trial from three to five years, with the ability to renew the detention order each year thereafter. This year marks the fifth anniversary of Aung San Suu Kyi’s arrest. Not only is she being held under a provision of the law that did not exist when she was first placed under house arrest, the military regime has indicated that her detention will be extended until at least the beginning of 1995.

Featured in this issue are excerpts from a transcript of the February 15, 1994 interview with Aung San Suu Kyi, her first public contact since being detained.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE: Discussing the Options

Few would argue the extent of the humanitarian need in Burma. The dramatically high infant/child mortality rate, the rise in heroin addiction and the rapid spread of HIV infection are only a few examples of the critical problems that face the country. Some would question, however, whether humanitarian need should necessarily be the sole criterion for humanitarian assistance. Among the considerations weighing into the discussion: Do conditions currently exist that permit aid to reach the people suffering the greatest need? Who would most benefit from such assistance, the people or the government? Would organizations providing assistance be allowed to operate with transparency and institutional integrity? One point is clear—the time has come for thoughtful examination of the issue.
any arguments have been advanced in recent months for a more "constructive engagement" with the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in Rangoon. Proponents argue that renewing official development assistance, promoting more foreign investment and even encouraging non-government organizations (NGOs) to provide humanitarian assistance will bring about much needed change in Burma. They maintain that "isolating" SLORC has not worked. Instead, supporters of this theory advocate more foreign investment and aid to bring about economic development which, they say, will in turn bring about social and political change. Those who promote engagement imply that Burmese democracy advocates are too impatient, unrealistic and want an immediate transfer of power—full Western style democracy and an instant Utopia. In contrast, the "constructive engagement" option is presented as a rational approach, taking into account existing realities and working to bring about change in a controlled fashion.

The urgent need for economic, social and political reform in Burma is not an issue. Both proponents of "constructive engagement" and its critics agree on this point. The disagreement centers on how to bring about this change. What is the best way to bring about change in Burma and what will work? To answer these questions, the assumptions behind the "constructive engagement" position are examined and steps toward possible change are identified.

HAS "ISOLATION" WORKED?

Foreign aid to SLORC was suspended by most governments to protest the brutal suppression of unarmed civilians in 1988. As admitted by "constructive" advocates, these governments have offered little more than moral support to Burma's pro-democracy activists and have not actually imposed any economic embargoes. * Is it true, then, that Western and Japanese governments instituted a policy of isolation that could be effective in bringing about SLORC's collapse?

Before judging the effectiveness of the policy, it is necessary to be clear on the expectations of the West and Japan. The question to ask is, "What results did the governments anticipate from suspending aid and what did they achieve?" Aid was suspended as a protest and to induce SLORC to introduce reforms. It can be legitimately claimed that without the suspension of aid and the accompanying international outrage over 1988 and subsequent events, SLORC would not have held the 1990 general elections, nor would it have allowed foreign observers to monitor the polling on election day. The fact that SLORC did not honor the results does not detract from this achievement. In addition, it can be claimed that the "open door" economy that is now being exploited by Burma's neighbors would not have come about...
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WILL AID BRING CHANGE?

After all, as activists and enacted embargoes and sanctions, accepted the arguments of the Burmese pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. The successes, however, can be more readily credited to the so-called "isolationist" governments. This is because the "constructive engagement" advocates made no demands on SLORC and it is generally agreed that SLORC made those concessions only to relieve both domestic and international pressure.

Rather than having failed, Western and Japanese government policy has been quite successful. The fact that most of the reforms or changes are superficial does not negate the fact that the so-called "isolationists" did bring about some measure of change on the part of the regime. If these governments had accepted the arguments of the Burmese pro-democracy activists and enacted embargoes and sanctions, they would in all likelihood have hastened the process of change in Burma.

WILL AID BRING CHANGE?

Even if the suspension of aid did achieve a measure of success, is there any merit in the argument that more aid and foreign investment could bring about change faster? Although "constructive engagement" advocates admit that, to date, the reforms introduced by SLORC have not been embraced to promote development, but to stave off further unrest, they would also suggest that the limited reforms have in fact stimulated economic growth. After all, as Time reported in its February 28 issue, the Burmese economy grew by 10.8 percent in 1992/93. If this is true, could not the momentum from such growth be used to bring about change?

Only those unfamiliar with the system introduced in Burma by the regime since 1962 would lend credibility to this growth figure. Serious analysts have always treated Burmese statistics with great skepticism. A good example of just how questionable "official" statistics might be is SLORC's manipulation of the figures depicting Burma's literacy rate. In 1987, government statistics showed Burma's literacy rate to be so low that the United Nations granted Burma a Least Developed Country status. This status allows Burma to be forgiven some of its foreign debt. It was conveniently forgotten that less than a decade ago Burma won a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) award for having one of the highest levels of literacy in the world. When looking at economic growth therefore, a more indicative rate for 1992/93 might be surmised from those of the three previous years: 1989/90 = 3.7 percent, 1990/91 = 2.7 percent, and 1991/92 = 1.3 percent.

The caveat about Burmese statistics aside, some would question how anyone can deny that economic life in Rangoon, Mandalay and other urban centers has changed noticeably. Modern buildings and luxury hotels are mushrooming even in smaller border towns. Are these not signs of new-found prosperity? Will the emerging middle class not eventually bring about change?

It is true that a segment of the Burmese population is benefiting from SLORC's reforms. But the question to ask is, "Are the signs of economic activity indicative of real economic development or rather, of excessive consumption? The lack of confidence in SLORC's economic policies is evident in the increasing demand for gold, precious stones and real estate. Even a photograph published in the April 27 issue of Asiaweek depicting people "benefiting from the junta's economic reforms" shows a mountain of Kyat notes, illustrating the runaway inflation gripping Burma and the worthlessness of the local currency. Since 1988, the money supply has increased at an annual rate of 53 percent and the rate of inflation is more than 150 percent, based on black market prices. While the official exchange rate is US$1=Kyat 6, the black market rate is US$1=Kyat 120. According to a Japanese "constructive" advocate, democracy will come to Burma when its per capita income reaches $1,500.- At the black market rate, the annual per capita income is only $10; that means Burma would not qualify for democracy for a long time to come.

In addition to these signs of increasing econo-
ic distress, the situation worsens as one leaves the major population centers. Rural infrastructure is almost non-existent. All roads and railway lines are in extreme disrepair. Forced relocation of villages for security reasons, conscription into the army, as soldiers, army porters or beasts of burden and conscription as slave labor to build new rail lines and roads, have seriously disrupted the social fabric of life in rural Burma. More and more "economic" refugees are fleeing to neighboring countries. This does not fit the picture of a country growing at 10 percent per annum.

These inconvenient facts bode ill for "constructive" advocates who see the Burmese economy as growing, and want more aid and investments to hasten development. In 32 years of uninterrupted military rule, Burma's economy, its civil service, its social infrastructure, its public health system, and its education system have all been manipulated and destroyed. There is nothing left on which to build. More aid and investment will only entrench SLORC, widen the gaps between urban and rural dwellers and the haves and the have-nots, and aggravate the current crisis.

A similar effort to revitalize the economy without introducing major reforms was attempted by the military in the mid-1970s. The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, Japan and other nations increased foreign aid to at least half a billion dollars. Then as now, the reforms were superficial and the aid was absorbed by the 56 state enterprises and the corrupt system until, by the mid-1980s, Burma was again facing an economic crisis and became a Least Developed Country, one of the poorest of the poor.

The question, therefore, is not whether foreign investment and aid will make a difference, but whether or not there is a will to introduce real reforms. This view is reinforced by recent United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and World Bank reports, and the fact that SLORC's "open door" economy hailed by "constructive" advocates is not really open. Twenty-three key basic commodities such as rice, teak, oil, gems, minerals and fish, are still controlled by the state. Joint ventures by foreign investors are mostly with state enterprises rather than with the private sector. More importantly, nine military owned-and-managed joint ventures dominate key sectors of the economy, the largest being the Myanmar Economic Holdings Company, which is managed by the Ministry of Defense. Such realities clearly indicate that more aid and foreign investment will not make a difference if SLORC does not introduce fundamental economic reforms.

THE THAI APPROACH

If the international community is unwilling to enact embargoes and take more decisive measures to bring about real changes in Burma, and if increased foreign aid and investments will not bring about fundamental changes either, what options are available? Will the status quo remain? Can SLORC continue along its own path to democratization at its own pace? Thailand, a number of Burma's other neigh-
bors, and some commercial interests have decided that SLORC is capable of remaining in power for the foreseeable future. This "pragmatic" approach is not concerned about long-term implications, political stability, basic economic fundamentals, or economic development in Burma. The only criterion it answers to is—can a profit be made now?

This approach could be perhaps justified for small time entrepreneurs who have no long-term aspirations. But for nations and Burma's neighbors to adopt such a policy is foolish and downright dangerous. To quote Surachart Bamrungsuk, a Thai scholar: "Arguments concerning the basic problems of Thai-Burmese relations are irresolvable because of the different assumptions about the future of SLORC and political change in Burma. However, regardless of the points argued, a more important issue is whether Thai foreign policy makers have provided themselves with sufficient options for the future. Conducting foreign policy without leaving one's options open is very hazardous. The risks are compounded in a situation where the potential for rapid change is present."

The real potential for rapid change in Burma can be seen from the events of 1988—the six months of unrest that paralyzed the then military-backed Burmese Socialist Programme Party government. These events are well known to the world. In 1988 the Burmese democracy movement was reborn. What is less well-known is the cause of the unexpected turmoil, a student brawl seemingly turned into a nationwide revolt.

As described earlier, expectations were raised in the mid-1970s. A new constitution was adopted, a "civilian" government came to power, the economy was "opened" up, and foreign aid and investments were welcomed. But then as now no fundamental changes were implemented. The "civilians" in the government were army officers who left their uniforms at home. The "open" economy was still controlled by the state. As a result, inflation soared, the price of rice and other commodities sky-rocketed as the value of the Kyat dropped, and the demand for consumer goods increased. Pressure mounted with the demonetization of large denomination Kyat notes until violence erupted in the country in 1988. The same symptoms exist today and are being compounded by the presence of numerous prosperous Chinese traders from across the border and from overseas. Resentment against Chinese domination, dormant for some time, is again on the rise. A serious backlash in the form of anti-Chinese riots, as in 1967, could easily develop as the gap widens between the masses and the SLORC elite. Given these conditions, the Thai approach may not be as "pragmatic" as it seemed initially. Those wishing to gain economic benefits from Burma by befriending SLORC may well lose their investment in the end.

ENGAGING THE GENERALS

How then can political change be brought to Burma before it is too late? Must Burma go through another convulsion of violence before the international community will act? What can be done to ensure that change comes to Burma in a more or less controlled fashion? A major flaw in the argument of the "constructive engagement" advocates and Thai policy makers has been their misconception of the nature of the Burmese military and of SLORC in particular. It is wrongly assumed that the Burmese generals would like to enjoy the benefits of economic development like their Southeast Asian counterparts. The generals in Burma do enjoy economic perks but their agenda is basically political, not economic, as in some ASEAN countries. Therefore, they will make economic concessions to achieve political aims rather than make political concessions to achieve economic aims. This has to be understood to engage the generals in an effective manner.

Events in the last six years have shown that SLORC is not equipped to deal with the major problems Burma is facing. Notwithstanding the mass rallies which are staged by the Union Solidarity and Development Association (an organization formed by SLORC and headed by five military cabinet ministers), there is no doubt that SLORC lacks the support of the populace. In spite of strict controls, delegates to the National Convention continue to protest SLORC's pro-military constitution. The people also continue to resist by seizing every opportu-
nity to turn everyday incidents into major civic disturbances, although these events go unreported in the international press. On the civil war front, while fighting has stopped to accommodate cease-fire talks with ethnic armies, SLORC troops are still tied down in spite of the army’s increased force of 300,000 men. SLORC is a beleaguered invading army in its own country, safe only within its armed enclaves. The international component of the Burmese democracy movement, although weakened by recent events, has also been able to maintain its own momentum. In other words, SLORC is fighting a rear-guard action for its political survival. It cannot advance and it cannot be defeated, as yet.

What then can be done? As we have already seen, accepting the status quo and doing nothing is not a viable option. For SLORC to continue ruling, it must be able to contain the economic crisis and hope that some minor incident does not spark a violent outburst as in 1988. The military must also be able to retain its cohesion after General Ne Win dies and, at the same time SLORC must move to prevent the ethnic groups from continuing their solidarity with the pro-democracy movement. All these necessary conditions are fraught with danger and risk.

The only really viable option for Burma is to solve both its political and economic problems together. The "constructive engagement" approach is not a viable option because it does not address the political question and only gives an economic solution which may at best be a stop-gap measure. As aptly put by Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong: "Economics and politics cannot be separated...There must be a competent government to create the right conditions for economic growth and the government must be able to mobilize the people to work with a common vision."

Where is the competent government to create the right conditions for economic growth, a government that can mobilize the people to work together with a common vision? It is definitely not the military. The leadership of the military was clearly rejected by the people in 1988. Just as decisively, the people, including the rank and file of the military, made their choice for a government known in the 1990 general elections—the tremendously popular National League for Democracy and by implication, its detained leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. What made the party’s victory unique was not only that the NLD won over 80 percent of the parliamentary seats, but that the election results were endorsed by the ethnic armies fighting SLORC. For the first time in 46 years, there is now a de facto popular national leader who may be able to give the people of Burma the "common vision" that has been so lacking.

If anyone is serious about helping to bring real change to Burma, they cannot ignore the role of Aung San Suu Kyi. Least of all, SLORC cannot afford to continue to ignore her. If the SLORC generals want to survive and prevent a repeat of 1988, they have no option but to talk to her. She has the legitimacy that SLORC can never obtain and only she can rally the people of Burma towards a common goal. If SLORC does not recognize or accept her leadership role in Burma, the days of SLORC rule are numbered and the future of Burma will indeed be bleak.

NOTES
2. FEER, 10 March 1994.
6. "Carrots for the SLORC to Promote Democracy in Burma?", unpublished paper by Dr. Mya Maung of Boston College.
7. "Constructive or Destructive Engagement?", unpublished paper by Surachart Bamrungsuk of Chulalongkorn University.
RICHARDSON: What do you see as the prospects for a national reconciliation?...
AUNG SAN SUU KYI: This is precisely why I've always asked for dialogue. You have to work out the terms and conditions under which national reconciliation can be brought about. If SLORC refuses to talk, how can they bring about national reconciliation?...

RICHARDSON:...I think the key... to democratic change in Burma is a dialogue between you and Khin Nyunt....
ASSK: I think I would rather put it as between SLORC and the NLD, or the democratic forces, because I'm not in favor of promoting any kind of personality cult or personality politics. This is something we've got to avoid from the beginning. When we set up a democracy we want to see a democracy which is based on solid principles, not on any personalities. You will say... "But this is what happens all over Asia," but [there's] no reason why we can't change that, why we shouldn't try to change that... I am only human and of course I like it when people care for me. But it's also rather worrying. I would like people to think of the democracy movement as a whole, not just as me. Just releasing me tomorrow is not going to do any good if the attitude of SLORC does not change... Whatever they do to me, that's between them and me. I can take it. What is more important is what they are doing to the country. And national reconciliation doesn't just mean reconciliation between two people—I don't accept that at all. It's a reconciliation between different ideas...What we need is a spiritual and intellectual reconciliation... I've always said that the only answer to Burma's problem is dialogue... I'm ready at any time, but they [SLORC] seem not terrible keen. And I wonder why.

RICHARDSON: The SLORC did say that during the period 1992/93 you rebuffed them on a dialogue.
ASSK: ...I must make it quite clear that they made no moves to have a dialogue of any kind. There were indications that they would quite like to negotiate with me on the terms under which I would leave Burma. That's not what I would call dialogue. And that's not what I would call negotiation.
RICHARDSON: They told me when I was here in August...

ASSK: ...I believe they told a Japanese delegation about it as well...

...92/93 period was when they allowed my family to come, and when they were quite nice to me. And there were indications that they would be prepared to negotiate with me...on the terms under which I would leave Burma. That is the impression I got. There was never a mention of dialogue. I mentioned dialogue. I said that the only real answer was negotiation and dialogue—it was no use letting some political prisoners free and it was no use letting my family come to see me. In fact, I was not keen on the idea of my family coming to see me at all because I felt that I did not want [them to come] until other prisoners had been released. In the end I did let Michael come, basically to show that I would compromise and I would be flexible. But SLORC has to understand that flexibility is not the same as weakness. And rigidity doesn't mean strength... Also they should not think that by making my personal circumstances easier for me this would in any way induce me to give up my political convictions. I don't care if they deprive me of all my privileges...

...I was brought a renewal of the detention order in January—for another year... The explanation they gave said that under that law under which I was detained, the Central Committee (which I'd never heard of before, and which according to the BBC nobody else had heard of before either) is the one which decides I'm put away.... under house arrest without trial for one year. At the end of the year [a] Council of Ministers... [is] allowed to extend this for three years. Then they changed the law to make it a total of five years. And then they said it means a total of five years from the time that the Council of Ministers extended my period of detention... I explained to [them] that under all existing norms of international justice when you say... a maximum of five years, you do count it from the day on which you're put under arrest... I said that [they] had better not go on pushing this because it's very exhausting for [them] to go on lying to me all the time.

RICHARDSON: What message would you want me to take back to President Clinton?

ASSK: We would like a clear-cut policy on Burma. If you want to support a movement which has been attacked on all sides within the country... you have to be very strong and clear. I think the United States has not been very clear-cut—I think it's an expression which the Senate used?... In the resolution they asked for a more clear-cut policy on Burma and I endorse that. A more clear-cut policy on Burma, in favor of the movement for democracy if you please—just to make it quite clear what I mean!...

RICHARDSON: ...Is there any message for the international community ...that you would like to convey?

ASSK: ...If I had to give one single message to the international community it would be to remind them that the success of any economic or political system is confidence. And without confidence nothing will work. That means confidence in the government and in the people, confidence between the business sector and the government, and the public sector ...It's no use setting up a National Convention if nobody has any confidence in it. It's not going to solve any problems. Economic measures which cannot win the confidence of the people are not going to work in the long term... I don't think that trade and other economic measures will lead to any real progress if there's no confidence. Confidence is the most important item for the success of any policy, whether it's economic or whether it's political. And of course, when you come down to if, there is a need for confidence between those who want democracy and those who don't. We've got to learn that people have different ideas, but that doesn't mean that we can't coexist. We've just got to agree to differ, for the sake of the country.

SHENON: ...On [the] question of economic assistance and trade... how should the world treat Burma?

ASSK: ...Of course, you are probably thinking of sanctions, aren't you?... Well, there have always been two schools of thought about sanctions. Some would
say it only harms the people; it doesn't harm the government against which it is directed. I don't think this controversy has ever been fully resolved, and certainly I would not like anything that harms the people. But then... is whatever trade [that is] going on really helping the people or is it simply helping the government to dig its heels in? This is the question which has to be asked.

Of course people say, "First economic progress, then democratization," and I have to ask, "Which examples are you giving?" ...if you're thinking of the ASEAN countries the pattern of the development is very, very different from that of Burma. And...the crucial thing is confidence. For example, Indonesia, which is currently the country with which people are comparing Burma: the conditions under which Suharto came into power are very, very different from the conditions under which SLORC came into power. One of the reasons why confidence is at such a low level in Burma is precisely because of the way in which the elections have been treated. Elections were promised, elections were held, but they [led] nowhere. And I think the people feel cheated. A lot of people's confidence is very much shaken ... I don't think this sort of thing happened in all those other countries. There was sufficient confidence in the governments of those ASEAN countries which have made progress. Even from the economic point of view, one of the things which always struck me about Indonesia after 1965—after Suharto took over—one of the first things he did was to cut down public expenditure and defense expenditure. Total opposite of what's happening in Burma...

ASSK: I'm not sure that those who are advocating constructive engagement have made themselves quite clear... What's the stick supposed to be?... The carrot is, I suppose, the economic help. What's the stick?

RICHARDSON: The stick right now is aid. And there is no aid. Burma gets no World Bank, no Asian Development Bank aid. They get limited UN aid. They want foreign investment—there's hardly any. They want infrastructure. They want more economic movement here.

ASSK: ...I just want to know what the Japanese think is the stick.

SHENON: They could argue the stick is the fact that there is now no aid, there is now very little trade with Japan. The stick is in place now would be their argument I suppose.

ASSK: They seem to be actually advocating the removal of the stick rather than a carrot and stick approach. But this is why I'm not quite clear—what do they mean by a carrot and stick approach? ...I'm just saying that you can stuff a mule to death with carrots.

REHEEM: I think it's reform with support. Speaking for others, there is a policy that says reform needs support. There is a price to reform... Any time you urge a reform you support it with technical knowledge, training programs, open opportunities for debate and discussion.

ASSK: In that case are they talking merely of economic reform?

REHEEM: No, a system reform.

ASSK: Then it's very simple. There has to be condition. If they need conditional help I'm not arguing about it... But it's got to be conditions which are meaningful.

RICHARDSON: What conditions do you think are meaningful?

ASSK: Dialogue... Dialogue can lead to a lot of things... I want to confront them [the SLORC] across a table, and I think that's what they mean when they say I'm confrontational, because I've never asked for...
any other sort of confrontation at all. It seems to me very strange that they're prepared to talk to armed insurgents but not to legal political parties...

RICHARDSON: You would set no preconditions on talking with the SLORC?

ASSK: I don't think anyone should set conditions on talking... I would meet with SLORC at any time... People say "Don't be in such a hurry"... but time makes a difference. Look at South Africa... This polarization between the Inkatha and the ANC came about in the 1970s, and there have been allegations that the government forces incited a lot of the violence that took place between [them]... If those talks between the government and the ANC had taken place ten years earlier, things might not have been so bad... Look at Yugoslavia... There was no confidence between the various groups in Yugoslavia. ...So you see, as long as you cannot foster confidence, time is not going to heal all wounds.

RICHARDSON: ...What would be your vision for Burma, if you were in power?

ASSK: It's not my vision... We must not emphasize this personality business. I'm quite happy to be a figurehead... [But] I'm not Burma... There are a lot of very, very able people in the NLD and in the country.

...You say, what is my vision of Burma. Well, my vision of Burma is a country where we can all sort out our problems by trying to understand each other and by talking to each other and by working together. Democracy is not going to solve all our problems. If people think that democracy comes today and everything's fine tomorrow, they're very much mistaken. I've always told them so: that democracy is just a beginning. I subscribe to the view that democracy is not perfect but it does happen to be better than other systems. One of the best things about democracy is that practicing liberal democracies always think of talking first and fighting as the last resort, when they've fought themselves to exhaustion and there's nothing else they can do, then they talk. By that time quite often it's done so much harm... "Parliament" comes from the word [in French] "talk", doesn't it. You talk, you talk about your problems, you talk about your differences. It's better to shout at each other than to kill each other. It's not that I like shouting, but it's certainly much better than shooting each other...

All this thing about democracy the Asian way, democracy the Burmese way—really you don't need to say this, because whatever system you establish in any country it will become unique to that country. American democracy is different from British democracy. It is different from French democracy, and so on. There will always be differences, but that doesn't mean that there are not certain fundamental principles which you have to accept. Without these fundamental principles it's not a democracy... I dread to think what the "Burmese way to Democracy", which is more-or-less the same as the "Burmese way to Socialism" [might be like]. One doesn't want just a difference in name. One wants a difference in attitude. And that is my vision: a country where people are not afraid to work out their differences. You don't have to hold back from dialogue because you think you're going to lose face in some way, or because you think you're not going to be able to come to an agreement. When you go to sit down to discuss something you always go... with the idea that some kind of agreement is possible. It may take time, it may have to be a compromise, but agreement is always possible as long as the will is there. Sincerity and goodwill are the foundation of confidence, and confidence is the foundation of any system which can succeed...

SHENON: You do see the opportunity for the NLD and the SLORC to reach a peaceful agreement that would lead to a democratic Burma?

ASSK: There is nothing on the side of the NLD that prevents this. It's the SLORC which is not taking this up. The NLD has always been prepared to talk to them...
SHENON: Well, assuming the dialogue begins [and] some confidence is developed in each other's words, do you see the possibility that there could be a democratically oriented government in Burma that could include a substantial component of the army? A political prospect?

ASSK: I'm not prepared to discuss it, because that's not for me to say. What I do want to make clear is that it's got to be a serious democracy, not a sham. That I would insist on. But of course, everybody in Burma has a role to play in the country and we've never ruled it out... We've just got to agree on who plays what role and how. But one group should not impose that on the country.

SHENON: But you can see a situation in which authority—influence—could be shared?

ASSK: I don't think I'm going to talk about shared influence. I want the government of Burma, the political system of Burma, to be based on confidence, and any arrangement that can win the confidence of the people will be acceptable. You could have a nominal and token democratic government, but if the practical fact is such that the people have no confidence in it as a democracy it's no use at all. You can have a country where there's no constitution at all, such as Britain, but nevertheless it is a democracy and nobody doubts that it's a democracy, least of all its own people. They have confidence in the fact that the government's a democracy. But in fact there is no document which says "these groups have this sort of influence."

You must accept that it is very difficult for me to make pronouncements on important matters on my own. It's not what I want to do. Whatever is agreed on must be agreed on through discussion and through consensus among ourselves and perhaps eventual compromise with other groups... I do know that a lot of us in the NLD were very anxious about giving the opposition a proper role, honoring it, respecting it, giving it an effective role. We didn't want a democracy in name only, because that's very bad for a democracy. I think it will keep the NLD on their toes if they had a good opposition... Even if there are very few of them [in opposition] we would have made sure that their voices were heard and that their views were listened to and that they were not persecuted... All of us in the Executive Committee of the NLD are completely agreed on this—the importance of a loyal opposition, loyal to the nation. It is a great pity that SLORC didn't take the opportunity in 1990 to speak to the NLD and establish a system which could have been acceptable to everybody. I don't know what's happened to the National Unity Party (NUP) now, but certainly if the NLD had been allowed to form a government at that time [after the election] I'm sure that we would have heard a lot more of the NUP's voice than we do. We would have allowed them a very loud voice in government. This is a sort of pseudo-Golkar party, the USDA (Union Solidarity and Development Association).

SHENON: You're uncomfortable with this question of personality. The fact is, you did win the Nobel Prize—

ASSK: Well, that is only because so many Burmese suffered.

SHENON: ...You have become a symbol for many people, and many people around the world know your name where they might not know the names of other Burmese.

ASSK: Well, that's very understandable. It's very much easier to give the Nobel Prize to one person... [Others] must have had a terrible time. Certainly I wasn't beaten up... I can read. I've got books here. I may be alone, but I can read, I can listen to the radio.

SHENON: How did you find out you'd won the Nobel Prize?

ASSK: On the radio. I heard it on the BBC.
SHENON: Did you have a response when you heard that?  
ASSK: Well, I’d heard about it for some time. I think I heard about it first at the time when Vaclav Havel put up my name. Then the weekend before the announcement of the prize the BBC and VOA said that I was one of the front-runners. So it was not altogether a surprise when the news finally came....

RICHARDSON: I saw your award....
ASSK: I've seen a photograph.

SHENON: When you heard it, was there a sense of satisfaction about it, or pleasure?  
ASSK: [Hesitant] No. I actually wrote the Nobel Committee very frankly about how I felt, and I felt tremendous humility and tremendous gratitude... I was very grateful because the prize meant that the movement for democracy would get a lot more recognition. Of course [I felt] humility because I know that other people have suffered a lot more....other people have died...

RICHARDSON: We [the US government] have been very strongly for democracy [in Burma]... The United States feels very strongly about you... The Secretary of State last week asked [UN Secretary General] Boutros Boutros Gali to appoint a Special Envoy for dealing with the Burmese issue. We're very strongly committed. I want to make it clear to you that I have asked SLORC for your unconditional release.
ASSK:... When I joined the democracy movement I made hardly any promises... because I don't want to make a promise which I'm not able to keep. But one of the things that I did promise was that I would work for the movement for democracy until we achieved our goal. And I can't go back on that promise... But I'm prepared to discuss ways and means of bringing about national reconciliation. One of the things which does not bother me is the question of not getting public office. I'm not hungry for public office. That is not a goal of my political work. But I suppose there are certain values which I must continue to uphold. If there's anything they [SLORC] are afraid of... if they're really serious about thinking that I have some sort of neo-colonialist bogey behind me—they have got to talk to me about that. I don't think they believe that anyway. That's just pure nonsense and I think they know it.

...My loyalties are to Burma, but I recognize the importance of the international community. I'm not going to abuse other countries, I'm not going to abuse the international community in order to prove my patriotism. It doesn't mean that just because I love my country I hate other people. That doesn't follow at all...

...I'm not at all surprised by [the qualifications for president proposed under the new constitution]. One does not like to think that it's personal vindictiveness, but if it isn't then what it reflects is a misunderstanding of the notion of democracy and an underestimation of the Burmese people. If they truly believe that somebody who is married to a foreigner... would put Burma under the foreign yoke, (a) they don't understand... that democracy means you're in office only so long as the people agree that you should be; and (b) they think that the Burmese people will keep in the position of leadership somebody who doesn't have their interest at heart... They [the Burmese people] will only support me as long as they are confident that I have their interests at heart. And if they lose that confidence they won't support me anymore. It's very simple...
HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE—DISCUSSING THE OPTIONS

THE QUESTION:
Humanitarian and Development Aid to Burma?

MARTIN SMITH

Amongst many re-evaluations now taking place in the international debate on Burma, the growing number of peace talks between the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and different armed ethnic opposition groups throws sharp focus on the question of humanitarian and development aid. Interpretations of what these ceasefires will mean at both the national and local levels are still difficult; it is still very early days. There also remains the critical question of political transition in Rangoon where Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is still under house arrest and the SLORC’s National Convention process, which began in January 1993, edges slowly forward.

Nonetheless, the ceasefire in February this year between the SLORC government and the powerful Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in northeast Burma is further evidence of the fast-moving changes that are now taking place in the complex world of Burma’s ethnic politics. For even the most cynical observer, the sight of Lt-Gen. Khin Nyunt, the SLORC Secretary-1, and Maj-Gen. Zau Mai, the KIO’s chief of staff, shaking hands in the Kachin State capital, Myitkyina, should be a clear warning that something new is being tried by different protagonists after four decades of armed conflict, in which hundreds of thousands have died. The challenge now to organizations in the international community concerned with the humanitarian and political crisis in Burma is to try and understand these developments and then reflect these new realities.

Until now, the initial reaction of many anti-government groups has been one of deep suspicion and concentrated more on the implications for new parties or fronts, such as the Democratic Alliance of Burma, which were set up between ethnic minority forces and urban activists in the aftermath of the 1988 democracy uprising. If the KIO ceasefire were the first such agreement, then perhaps this would not have been so surprising.

In fact, the ceasefire with the KIO, which is undoubtedly one of the best-organized armed opposition groups in Burma, is the tenth with different ethnic forces since the SLORC came to power. Leaders on all sides are agreed that huge social, eco-
nomic and political problems still remain. Although little reported in the world outside, as a result of these ceasefires, villagers in vast ethnic minority areas of Burma under the control of various Pa-O, Wa, Shan, Palaung and Kokangese ethnic forces are today enjoying their first real halt to the hostilities in decades. Defying many predictions, until now the ceasefires have endured though continued clashes with groups as varied as the Karen National Union (KNU) and Mong Tai Army of Khun Sa elsewhere in Burma demonstrate that no sustained peace is likely until the peace process involves every armed group.

Certainly, the offer of peace talks is one that the remaining ethnic nationalist forces, including the KNU and New Mon State Party, are now discussing very carefully indeed. “We believe the SLORC is very serious over the issue of peace talks,” said one senior KNU officer. “We have been struggling for over 40 years for a just political solution and have always been willing to talk. The question for us is—are they sincere?”

This same dilemma has equal relevance to Burma’s neighbors and those Western governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which, until now, have been the main providers of sanctuary for humanitarian aid to refugees, students and the other victims of conflict around Burma’s borders. Virtually all official Western aid to the Burmese government was cut off in 1988 in protest at the SLORC’s assumption of power. Since this time, the international response has largely been divided between Western governments, which have supported a policy of arms embargoes and human rights pressure at the United Nations (UN), and neighboring countries, especially China and Thailand, which have advocated a policy they call “constructive engagement.”

It is still highly debatable, however, which policy has produced more results in a country which remains one of the most isolated in the world. If nothing else, the unexpected but growing number of ethnic ceasefires are an important reminder that it is for the Burmese peoples themselves to decide their own political destiny. Burmese politics is a complex and dangerous minefield which has rarely been safe to enter. A decade of full-scale military backing by China to the insurgent Communist Party of
Burma and Western support for ex-Prime Minister U Nu, who took to the jungles with the KNU and other ethnic forces in the early 1970s, ended in failure and did not produce the intended results.

It should, therefore, never be forgotten that the present state of confrontation did not begin in 1988 and it is always necessary to take a long-term view. There have been deep-rooted and unresolved problems in the structure of Burmese society and politics, some inherited from the era of British rule, which have continued since insurrections first broke out. Subsequently Burmese issues have emerged which are still to be addressed: military transition, civilian (or democratic) government, and ethnic minority rights. Sometimes one problem has appeared uppermost and sometimes another; their inter-relationships are constantly changing. But in the long-term, whichever government is in power, these underlying and potentially destabilizing issues are likely to remain until a real and voluntary consensus is achieved among all the Burmese peoples.

Nonetheless, though the political future is still unpredictable, one important and positive consequence of the ceasefire movement and gradual opening by the SLORC is that it has at least allowed the first tentative examination of Burma's humanitarian problems in many off-limits areas of the country in decades. The first outside agencies allowed access to these areas were from the United Nations after 1989 (notably the UNDP and UNICEF), but increasing numbers of NGOs are also visiting different areas of the country. Medicins Sans Frontieres (Holland), for example, now has health-training projects in Rangoon and the Rakhine State and has also recently been discussing another project in the Kachin State.

Though in implementing terms only the smallest start has actually been achieved, through all these studies and visits a gradual picture is beginning to emerge of the scale and nature of Burma's immediate humanitarian needs. When compared to Somalia or Rwanda, some foreign diplomats have suggested that the word "crisis" has often been overworked in the Burmese context. One of the most fertile and mineral rich countries in Asia, Burma has produced many talented and well-qualified people only too eager to put their skills to work once circumstances allow and the political impasse recedes.

However, with an average per capita income of just $250 per annum, it is undoubtedly true that the long years of conflict and stagnation have taken an increasingly serious toll. Today Burma possesses health and social problems more often attributed to the world's most impoverished nations, including neighboring Bangladesh with which it shares Least Developed Country status at the UN. For example, according to UNICEF statistics, a maternal mortality rate of at least 250 per 100,000 live births means a minimum of eight women die in Burma every day from pregnancy-related causes. Children are even more vulnerable; though infants up to the age of five make up only 15 percent of the total 43 million population, they account for almost half the annual death rate, mostly due to easily treatable illnesses such as diarrhea, malaria and pneumonia. In many areas the quality of educational provision is also very low. Indeed, according to one joint-study by UN agencies and the Ministry of Education, less than one in three children complete the basic four-year cycle of primary school.

Clearly, such underlying social problems can only be addressed by long-term health and educational programs which have real outreach into the most impoverished and war-affected regions of the country. Questions have also been raised by different UN and development officials over government policies, such as the controversial civilian resettlement and labor programs, which exacerbate rather than alleviate social ills.

In the coming years, arguments are thus likely to continue over the political context in which long overdue social reforms are eventually introduced. In the short-term, however, four major areas stand out as demanding immediate humanitarian concern—and these have largely been confirmed by virtually every new study completed since 1988.

The first is the chronic state of undevelopment of the infrastructure and economy. Since the SLORC came to power there have been new business developments in Rangoon and, more especially, Mandalay, but in many areas the consequences of five decades
of political instability and ethnic conflict are now beginning to catch up fast. UNICEF officials have reported cases of severe malnutrition from Rangoon hospitals, and for many families economic survival is now their daily priority. In what is now Burma's third major period of political transition since independence, it is difficult to see how any sustainable social, health or economic policies can be introduced unless these glaring problems in the economy are addressed in tandem with the political process.

The second problem is closely connected: the humanitarian consequences of over four decades of armed conflict. The human cost of these wars is incalculable; as many as 10,000 people a year have died. In the northern Shan State alone, community leaders estimate that as much as half of the population has moved into the towns, been internally displaced or fled into exile since fierce fighting first erupted in this remote mountain region in the mid-1960s. Such dislocations echo the mass movements of Burman and ethnic minority peoples in other parts of the country beginning as long ago as 1948. For the international community, the 75,000 refugees (mostly Karens and Mons) in official camps in Thailand and the estimated 200,000 Muslim refugees still in camps in Bangladesh are the most visible evidence of these conflicts. Thai government officials, however, have recently reported that the true number of refugees from Burma might be closer to 350,000. There are also substantial, though unrecorded, refugee populations in both China and India.

Any final solutions to these problems must therefore involve an urgent program of humanitarian relief and resettlement. It is no exaggeration to say that there may well be over one million internally displaced people inside Burma today. Of course, while groups such as the KNU are still outside the peace process, many imponderable issues remain. But what has been immediately striking about the most recent talks by government military officers with groups such as the Kachins, Mons and Karennis is that, in addition to political recognition, they have allowed the first real discussion between the different protagonists on humanitarian and development questions in over three decades.

Disappointment and frustration has been voiced that despite the prospect of ceasefires, internationally-condemned practices—including compulsory labor and porterage—have still continued. Nonetheless, Mon and other ethnic minority leaders say that they have been encouraged that, until now at least, the concept of co-political and economic development has been considered as part of the peace package. This could well include cross-border aid if mutually agreed as necessary and, apparently confirming this, talks have already taken place involving both Thai and Western NGO officials. (It is important to stress, however, that all ceasefires to date are essentially military, and it has been agreed by all sides to put long-term political issues on the back-burner after so many years of conflict as each local problem is approached one step at a time.)

This leads to the third and fourth humanitarian crises facing Burma today, which in many ways are closely related—narcotics and AIDS—and it is these which are attracting increasing international concern. For over three decades the twin problems of narcotics and insurgency in northeast Burma have been inextricably inter-linked. According to the US State Department, Burma today is the world's largest producer of illicit opium and heroin, with an annual opium harvest which has doubled since 1988 to over 2,000 tons per annum. Over the years, blame has been apportioned on a variety of different actors in the Shan State's labyrinthine politics—and clearly some groups have been more involved than others. The international narcotics trade has long fuelled its own corruption. But the simple fact is that no single agency or alliance has ever had full access to all the different poppy-growing areas, which is essential if real solutions are ever to be found.

Often misleading, foreign attention has usually focused on the international implications of this trade. However, as with the consequences of war, it is hard to find any family in northeast Burma which has not been affected in some way by this terrible scourge. Heroin addiction is rife in government as well as armed opposition areas, and doctors in every community stress that, until there is real peace, crop substitution and drug rehabilitation programs will...
continue to be, at best, only partially effectual.

The virtual overnight explosion in the AIDS epidemic in Burma has only added to the imperative to deal with these problems. Up until September 1993, only 5,862 cases of HIV-infection had been officially recorded. However, by the latest World Health Organization estimates, Burma has well over 100,000 HIV-carriers today, and AIDS is continuing to spread rapidly throughout the country—largely through intravenous drug-use or migrant workers and female prostitutes returning from Thailand. The nightmare scenario of a new human catastrophe which could rival even casualty figures in the long ethnic conflicts was apparently confirmed by sentinel surveillance figures last September, which uncovered alarming rates of over 90 percent HIV-infection amongst intravenous drug-users in the Kachin State. Lower but still shocking figures amongst pregnant women and other sample groups in the southern Shan State and southeast Burma confirmed all the worst predictions of the swift transmission of the disease to and from Thailand.

Clearly, the problem of AIDS knows no human rights boundaries, and this has been causing deep-felt alarm amongst leaders in every community in Burma. Significantly, even before the KIO ceasefire was signed, different posters were circulating in towns throughout northeast Burma, some produced by government health officials and some by the KIO, warning of the dangers of narcotics and how to prevent HIV-infection.

A massive humanitarian effort against narcotics and AIDS, which is something every Burmese citizen desires, thus raises the possibility of joint cooperation between many long-divided communities, which was inconceivable even a few years ago. But based on experiences elsewhere, for such programs to really succeed new social freedoms and rights must be restored to the local communities and groups such as Buddhist organizations in the villages and the Kachin Baptist Convention, which was the main go-between in the peace talks between the KIO and the SLORC. This is something that SLORC officials are now seriously considering, and as long as the peace
Aid must be used to help solve rather than exacerbate political, ethnic or religious differences.

But if by providing aid one can reach directly to the people without divisively empowering one political or ethnic faction, then on humanitarian grounds alone the question deserves the most serious examination.

process continues its current momentum, the issue of how and if NGOs (both indigenous and foreign) might work on social issues in Burma is gaining its first real public examination in years.

How then should the international community respond? Every organization, of course, should make its own judgement according to its own criteria in what remains a very complex situation. Aid must be used to help solve rather than exacerbate political, ethnic or religious differences. But if by providing aid one can reach directly to the people without divisively empowering one political or ethnic faction, then on humanitarian grounds alone the question deserves the most serious examination.

The easy way out is to justify inaction and say that Burma will become another Bosnia or is simply waiting for another repetition of the events of 1988, which will be even more bloody next time. Certainly, a plausible case for either scenario could be made by any student of history. However this is to ignore that what the country desperately needs more than anything else is peace and reconciliation. All the Burmese people must one day be able to sit at the same table as equals, without the threat of coercion by any armed group. Any step which enhances this process after so many years of conflict is not to be dismissed out of hand.

It would be a tragedy, therefore, if humanitarian aid—whether by cutting or prompting support—was to become the next political football in Burma's continuing crisis. The real victims would be the Burmese peoples themselves. Ultimately, of course, it is actions taken by the different protagonists in the coming months which will delineate the parameters of what is really possible in terms of development and humanitarian aid.

The current threat of coercive pressures on refugee populations by Thailand will prove counterproductive. Nonetheless, international organizations should also be aware that essential aid which can be used to support the long overdue spirit of reconciliation and dialogue, as part of the process of political reform, is one virtually all the Burmese peoples would support. They have already suffered far too much.
Dawei Township, in southern Myanmar, is a long way from Washington, DC where Dr. Khin Mae Ohn worked as a medical resident. Bright, intelligent, and articulate, Dr. Ohn now finds herself home in Myanmar fanning away flies in the tropical heat and stoking fires to sterilize medical instruments. Strolling through her tidy clinical ward, Dr. Ohn tenderly explains the case histories of a few patients and, especially discreetly, indicates which beds contain her four AIDS patients. Later, after the tour of Dawei Township hospital, Dr. Ohn explained to our team of investigators in October 1993 that "in August and September, we had 10 cases, but I didn't report them because I didn't have enough test kits to make a final diagnosis."

To those who have worked in the epidemic's war zone, Dr. Ohn's 14 AIDS patients over three months may seem statistically insignificant, but combined with similar anecdotal reports from other parts of the country, the unreported cases start adding up to an impressive problem. For reasons of poor access and availability to medical care, misdiagnosis by inexperienced clinicians, distrust of government services, poor reporting mechanisms, and HIV positive people mistaking their symptoms for other common diseases (e.g. malaria, diarrhea, upper respiratory infections), a large proportion of people with AIDS—at least in the first years of the epidemic—will pass by the public health system unrecorded. Knowing full well that the small number of AIDS cases being reported to health authorities in Yangon today represent only a fraction of the actual number of people living with AIDS in Myanmar, our review team was still disturbed by the number of AIDS cases we were observing in hospitals throughout the country. At best, our program review team expected the medical staff to be only marginally informed about the basics of AIDS and HIV infection and generally inexperienced in the diagnosis and treatment of symptomatic expressions. We could not have been further from the truth.

While Thai provincial doctors and nurses have had the luxury of attending well-funded workshops and seminars before the inevitable arrival of AIDS diseases (e.g. malaria, diarrhea, upper respiratory infections), a large proportion of people with AIDS—at least in the first years of the epidemic—will pass by the public health system unrecorded. Knowing full well that the small number of AIDS cases being reported to health authorities in Yangon today represent only a fraction of the actual number of people living with AIDS in Myanmar, our review team was still disturbed by the number of AIDS cases we were observing in hospitals throughout the country. At best, our program review team expected the medical staff to be only marginally informed about the basics of AIDS and HIV infection and generally inexperienced in the diagnosis and treatment of symptomatic expressions. We could not have been further from the truth.

While Thai provincial doctors and nurses have had the luxury of attending well-funded workshops and seminars before the inevitable arrival of AIDS

1. As of June 1993 only 85 cumulative cases of AIDS had been reported in Myanmar. World Health Organization experts estimate that there are probably more than 1,000 cumulative cases of AIDS and more than 100,000 people currently infected with HIV. By comparison, various projected estimates of HIV infected people in Thailand range from 250,000 to 400,000.
patients, their Burmese colleagues are being baptized by fire. While the world media focused its spotlight on the dramatic AIDS situation unfolding in Thailand, HIV was silently taking hold across the border in villages and townships across Myanmar. Having slipped in through the back door of dread and denial, public health officials in Myanmar are now having to change their perception of HIV/AIDS from that of an unfortunate Thai problem to an indigenous threat needing immediate attention.

Is the epidemic in Myanmar a consequence of the concurrent epidemics in Thailand, southern China (Yunnan province), and India? If so, wouldn't the absence of a large commercial sex industry in Myanmar check the rapid dissemination of HIV throughout the country? Though Myanmar shares common borders with Thailand, Yunnan, and India, it is Thailand and Yunnan who are playing the crucial roles influencing the recent social and economic changes which are having an impact upon the epidemic's progression. The explosion of AIDS in Myanmar is less of a Thai or Chinese import than a result of the enormous demographic transformations occurring along its common borders with Thailand and Yunnan. Understanding the social, demographic, and economic forces which are permanently altering this part of the world will ultimately shed light upon the types of strategies and programs needed to slow down the pace of the AIDS epidemic.

Three decades of stern, centrally planned economic policies coupled with perpetual civil strife in the border regions, has poorly equipped the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) with the most essential tool in mounting successful AIDS prevention programs—namely, strong community-based institutions which can make the important social inroads government institutions are incapable of doing. SLORC's institutional efforts may ultimately fail not so much for a lack of desire to "do the right thing," than for its inexperience in dealing with complex issues like (1) developing community-based organizations, (2) addressing reproductive and sexual health issues, and (3) implementing voluntary behavioral change strategies in drug rehabilitation and participation in prostitution. With limited resources and experiences to deal with the epidemic, SLORC continues to be over dependent upon its notable, but weak and ill-equipped medical establishment whose resources—even in the absence of AIDS—are already severely limited. I argue that the clinical environment has serious limitations in providing prevention and care services. Certainly national programs utilizing clinic-based services are necessary, but one of the most difficult challenges SLORC faces today is recognizing that the prevention of HIV infection

2. A recent, unpublished survey conducted in September 1993 sheds a little more light on the extent and nature of the epidemic. Regional data from the northeastern Shan state—the pivotal region bordering Thailand and China's endemic areas—showed that men and women are roughly equally infected, that most HIV positive people have a history of labor migration to Thailand, and HIV infected men tend to be transport workers and laborers while HIV infected women tend to come from rural Shan households.
and the care and support of people affected by and living with AIDS will most effectively take place through the expanded services of community-based programs, not the medical clinic.

**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CAUSES & CONSEQUENCES**

Since the advent of AIDS in the early 1980’s, the medical profession in general, and epidemiologists in particular, have established a strong influence over the definitions and development of prevention and care programs. Except for Thailand, virtually all AIDS prevention activities in Southeast Asia are under the direction and supervision of national health ministries. However, an increasingly broad and diverse group of non-medically oriented individuals (e.g. social activists, anthropologists, economists, and feminists) rightfully articulate that HIV disease is a symptomatic expression of much larger social, economic, and political problems. They argue that AIDS prevention solutions must extend beyond the micro management of infection to the macro issues of poverty, inequality, and education. The person with HIV/AIDS is much more than a clinical problem or an epidemiological puzzle solvable through serological surveys—he or she is, more accurately, a product of economic marginalization, misogyny, political disempowerment, homophbic cultural values, and discrimination in general. Teaching a female sex worker how to use and negotiate for condom use, though noble and morally correct, is futile if she has no power within the context of her life and her work environment; talking about the need to stop needle-sharing behavior must include a discussion on drug rehabilitation and enforcement policy revisions as well as addressing the over all situation of drug supply and demand.

When it comes to AIDS in the region, Myanmar’s northeastern Shan state could not have been more poorly situated. Sandwiched in between two booming economies itching to trade with each other—Thailand wanting access to Yunnan’s consumer markets and Yunnan seeking Thai southern ports to export its products—this once isolated region is being jettisoned into the 21st century without having experienced much of the 20th. The beautiful cascade of rain forest noises are drowned by power saws clearing 10-wheel truck, all-weather highways. The idea of road building alone linking Yunnan and Thailand may seem innocuous, but the construction of major transportation arteries through this impoverished and isolated area of Southeast Asia will support vehicles carrying much more than new and improved soap products for local residents.

The trucking industry in Thailand comprises one of the highest concentrations of HIV infection outside of the sex industry. Currently 3-5 percent of Thai truckers are HIV infected with an expectation that this figure will increase to 10-29 percent by the year 2000. It would be misleading and irresponsible to point a finger and blame Thai truckers for spreading HIV infection throughout the Shan state. Though unprotected sexual liaisons between Thai truckers and the local population is a real possibility, focusing on truck drivers as the source of infection would be a myopic explanation to a very complex set of social and economic variables. Besides, Thai truckers will not be the only ethnic group transporting goods to and through Myanmar. There is already a shortage of Thai drivers to meet the increasing labor demands of the Thai trucking industry and the UNDP anticipates that young Shan, Kokang, and Wa males will certainly meet these labor demands, increasing the quantity and diversity of demographic interchanges in the region. And adding fuel to the fire, a Thai working group on AIDS estimates that up to 20 percent of local upland women returning from prostitution work in Thailand are HIV infected.

The HIV pandemic is obviously much more than just a medical problem. In fact, the direct medical costs of AIDS are probably the least significant problem the Myanmar government faces today. In order to address the myriad causes and consequences of AIDS in Myanmar—and thus reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with HIV disease—leaders and decision-makers will first need to comprehend the complex interactions between HIV/AIDS and its social, economic and political developments. Dr. Desmond Cohen, UNDP’s chief economist for the HIV and Development Program, succinctly argues

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In order to address the myriad causes and consequences of AIDS in Myanmar—and thus reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with HIV disease—leaders and decision-makers will first need to comprehend the complex interactions between HIV/AIDS and its social, economic and political developments.
two fundamental relationships concerning the economic impact of AIDS in Burma: the interrelationship between social, cultural and economic variables influencing the spread of HIV, and the effect of HIV/AIDS on the performance of the economic and social systems.

In reference to these interrelationships, the construction of roads in the Shan State provides a good example of how a previously isolated area gains direct contact to new peoples, products, and ideas heretofore unattainable. The development of roads will permanently alter the region's economy and create the potential to introduce HIV into a low prevalence area, ultimately affecting the region's economic progress in five to ten years. However, it must be recognized that HIV has already diffused throughout the country—how much, for how long, and generally who is infected are future questions for limited epidemiological studies to query. The important fact to acknowledge is that HIV is already a Burmese problem—not an unwanted Thai import—and now Myanmar will have to confront the same prevention problems all other countries are currently facing.

The social, economic, political, and cultural variables determining and influencing the diffusion of HIV throughout northeast Myanmar are just now being systematically assessed. But in the short-run, it is clear that inter-regional trade—and thus the transport of goods, services and people—will increase dramatically due to the current absence of domestic industries producing competitive goods and services. Myanmar is rapidly becoming economically dependent on the burgeoning Yunnanese and the powerful Thai economies. Unable or seriously handicapped to develop effective enterprises itself—at least in the short-run—the Myanmar economy becomes more dependent upon cross-border trade in order to satisfy increasing domestic demands for consumer goods. Not only can economic developments facilitate the spread of HIV, the infection itself could wreak havoc on Myanmar's social and economic developments.

Compounding the economic strangle hold from its neighbors, the Shan State and other border regions bring their own contributing set of pre-existing conditions which facilitate HIV's rapid dissem-
Myanmar may very well be the Asian equivalent of the social and economic destruction seen in Africa today—AIDS orphans, untended fields, and absenteeism.

In contrast to their lowland Burmese neighbors, the Shan, Kokang, and Wa live predominantly in upland, mountainous areas where economic conditions border on the disastrous. Deforestation for short term agricultural production, logging, and mining are irreparably draining future generations of vast resources to exploit via managed growth. Male labor shortages due to loss of life from conscripted military service translate into women employing monocropping techniques and overusing cultivated land for lack of labor to till new soils. Villages contend with regular food deficits and most households work low-fertility land without the aid of draught animals. The upland regions have some of the world’s highest infant mortality rates. Somewhere between 25-40 percent of household labor time is already lost due to preventable illnesses. Superimpose more debilitating illness and premature death (as a result of AIDS) on the already stretched subsistence-level farming households, and one can expect to witness a further downward spiral in social and economic indicators.

What does agriculture have to do with AIDS? How does deforestation and changing cropping patterns affect the transmission of HIV or impact the outcome of the AIDS epidemic? Can we really blame AIDS on unemployment? When economic conditions degenerate to sub-optimal levels (certainly levels below subsistence) people take drastic measures or at least attempt to change a bad situation with whatever few options are at their disposal. In the case of a poverty stricken family struggling to feed its members, sending a daughter or son off to work across the border alleviates one hungry mouth and increases the potential of having cash sent home. In the case of societies already losing members to AIDS, and where household and community labor is divided by gender, the loss of males can force women to take over traditionally male tasks. In general, women can’t plow the fields as fast or as efficiently, and not having any spare male labor to help, some of her possible choices are either to switch to less labor intensive crops (which may not pay as well or meet subsistence level needs) or use limited savings to pay for male labor services. Finding the cash, however, becomes problematic: she may have to spend less time with her children and more time producing a cash crop or cottage industry; or, she may forego time in the field growing a diverse array of food crops in order to raise singular and/or inedible cash crops, all perhaps to the nutritional detriment of her children.

If Dr. Cohen’s two fundamental relationships are valid (which were formulated mostly from experience gained out of the African epidemic), the AIDS epidemic in Myanmar could make the one in Thailand seem like an outbreak of influenza—something manageable, controllable. Many African societies of the sub-Sahara have been devastated by the vicious downward spiral AIDS produces on a subsistence level farming community. Myanmar may very well be the Asian equivalent of the social and economic destruction seen in Africa today—AIDS orphans, untended fields, and absenteeism.

OUT OF THE HOSPITALS, INTO THE STREETS

Since 1990, the then nascent National AIDS Prevention and Control Program has depended a great deal upon the medical establishment to carry out the majority of its activities. This dependence is a typical result of the "medicalization" of AIDS in general, the convenience of using an already established institution, and the belief that health care professionals have a greater-than-average impact on the lives of the average citizen. Even though the translation of a doctor’s advice to home action has not been formally studied regarding HIV in Myanmar, most experts agree that prescriptions to change high risk sexual behaviors will not be as easily followed as recommendations for other, less sensitive behaviors such as taking medications or changing diet. In short, I believe the Myanmar AIDS program would accomplish a great deal and avoid unnecessary failures by establishing the limits of a health care professional’s influence.

There is nothing wrong with working through the medical establishment. In fact, building its capacity to deal more effectively with the AIDS epidemic—largely through the improved diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases—is
AIDS prevention programs throughout Myanmar will be much more successful if they are popularly viewed as peer-oriented, not as foreign products... nor as top-down orders from medical authority figures.

A RAY OF HOPE

Most Myanmar villages may be economically impoverished, but they are definitely rich in their tradition of community organizing and participation. Though poor, teachers devote extra time in order to teach literacy and village nuns raise money to help a poor family, build a stupa or buy a statue of the Lord Buddha. A typical Burmese village is constantly abuzz with fund raising and community-oriented activities. By tapping into this community spirit of action and compassion, three-quarters of the battle against AIDS is already won, but as the saying goes "you can't squeeze blood out of a turnip". The will and desire to mount a comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention and control program certainly exist at the village level, but there is only so much a poor community can give before it can't give any more. The problem for national authorities in Yangon, ultimately, will be figuring out a way to tap community resources and support them (financially, technically) to their best potential without being overly controlling and manipulative.

Myanmar has much to learn from the mistakes made in Thailand. When the alarms were sounded in the mid-1980's, many Thai officials—like their current Burmese counterparts—believed that Buddhism's Five Precepts were plenty protection from the social evils causing AIDS. After all, Thais were good moral people; it was "other" un-Thai people like "farangs" (foreigners), drug addicts, homosexuals and prostitutes who got AIDS. "Chao Ban" (villagers)—the litmus of "Thai-ness"—and the institution of the family were perceived to be morally immune. Had government officials acted upon the threat earlier, perhaps tens of thousands of Thais today would not be infected with HIV. And today, while the world clucks its collective tongue about the rapidly progressing AIDS tragedy in Thailand, thousands of Burmese become infected every year because virtually little or no substantial prevention efforts are taking place.
Since late last year, the Burmese military regime has continuously forced local inhabitants into slave-labor for the construction of 110-mile long Ye-Tavoy railway. During this process, SLORC has dramatically increased the use of forced labor from about 2,000 people during the beginning of construction in October and November of 1993 up to some 60,000 people in March and April of this year. The urgency of the construction most likely reflects SLORC’s attempt to secure the area from the Gulf of Martaban to the power plants in Kanchanaburi Province of Thailand where the proposed gas pipeline is to be laid. An estimated 120,000 to 150,000 local civilian families from towns and villages many miles around the rail route have already been subjected to this forced labor. As a result, it is estimated that at least half a million people who are members of the victimized families have suffered the appalling consequences. Two victims who fled Burma to Thailand tell their story:

INTERVIEW I

A 52-year-old male villager of Paung Taw, Yebyu Township, who fled Feb. 26 to escape the forced labor in the Ye-Tavoy railway construction.

Q: What did you do when you were in Paung Taw village?
A: I lived by fishing.

Q: Why did you have to work in the railway construction?
A: The local Burmese military authorities required each household of the village to contribute one laborer for the railway construction: we dare not refuse the orders of the military authorities and I had to go and work there for my family.

Q: Who came to tell you to go and work there?
A: Our village-headmen. They were ordered by the local commanders to urge the villagers to go and work there.

Q: Are the villagers paid for their labor?
A: They are not paid. They have to work for free.

Q: What food did you get to eat during your work there?
A: We went by car to Kalainaung (about 8 miles); and from Kanbauk we went by car to Kalainaung (about 8 miles); and from Kalainaung we went by car again to reach our work site near Natkyizin village (some 30 miles). We had to go to the work site at our own expense.

Q: What was your work there?
A: The 120 people from our village, including myself, were given to clear away all the trees and bushes for (100 x 100) square feet, to remove all the tree-stumps and smooth the ground, to break some hills, etc. We, the 120 people from Paung Taw, were required by the authorities to complete the work in 15 days.

Q: Were there any villagers who fled from the work sites to escape the hard labor?
A: Many villagers have fled the work sites to escape the hard labor. According to the orders of the military authorities, if a villager flees away during working at the work site, his/her family in the village must pay a fine of 3,000 Kyats. Now I still worry for my family in the village. I know that my family has no money. So I am not sure if any member of my family is arrested and detained by the military authorities, for they cannot afford to pay the fine.

Q: How many people from your village have to go to work a day?
A: All the households of the village have to contribute one laborer a day. Our village (Paung Taw) has 120 households, therefore, a total of 120 people from our village have to work there.

Q: Why did you have to go to work for the railway?
A: Our village-headmen. They told us that we must complete the work in 15 days.

Q: What did you do when you decided to flee?
A: I worked for my family in the railway construction. But this is only our own way of distributing duty between men and women. There was no instruction from the authorities to distribute duty this way, what they told us was that we must complete the work in 15 days.

Q: How many of them were women, including yourself?
A: Among the 120 people working in the railway construction, there were about 40 women, including some young girls aged between 14 and 15.

Q: How many days had you worked there before you fled the village?
A: I had worked for 11 days before I fled from the village.

Q: What did you have to do during the 11 days you were working there? Did you do the cooking or work with them?
A: I did the cooking for some days and had to work in the railway construction for the other days. During the days I worked for the railway, I had to clear the trees, to remove the tree-stumps, to clean the ground by sweeping and burning off the leaves, to carry the earth and fill in the low places, and so on.

Q: Why did you decide to flee away?
A: We were continuously required to work in the railway construction and we didn't even have time to do our own jobs to survive. Again, we had to work very tiredly for the railway. We couldn't afford to work on for the unpaid hard job and so decided to flee away.

The above is an excerpt from the Ye-Tavoy Railway Report. See the media resource section for information on obtaining a copy.
JUNTA LEADER DEFENDS FORCED LABOR
RANGOON, APRIL 27, 1994

Burma's military junta leader defended his regime's use of forced labor Wednesday and lashed out at foreign governments and their "stooges" for trying to tarnish the country's regime.

Foreign criticism of Burma's labor policies and human rights record fails to take into account Burmese attitudes toward unpaid work, Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, first secretary of the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council, told members of Burma's Foreign Service.

Nyunt said "voluntary labor" is treated by the Burmese people as a noble act of charity. "In the west, however, labor without wage is looked upon as an act involving loss of a human right."

Burma's junta has been criticized by the United States and other governments for using press-gang laborers to build a railroad in the southern part of the country and "porters" to carry munitions and other supplies for Burmese troops fighting ethnic minorities.

In both cases, the laborers are forced to work without pay and suffer from a high rate of disease and death from exhaustion, reported Amnesty International and other human rights groups.

"We have steadfastly opposed accusations of human rights abuse made on the basis of set values and rigid norms without regard to the country's specific history culture and religion and its customs and usages," Nyunt said.

He urged Burmese diplomats to "repair the damage done by some foreign states and their stooges to Burma's international image."

The general's speech, reported verbatim in the government-run New Light of Myanmar newspaper on Wednesday, also touched on foreign policy, narcotics suppression and the expansion of the Burmese economy.

Khin Nyunt said the economy achieved a 6 percent Gross Domestic Product growth rate in the fiscal year ending March 31.

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BUSINESS WATCH

MALAYSIAN ENTREPRENEUR MARKETS
$100 MILLION INVESTMENT FUND

According to the May 26, 1994 issue of the Financial Times, the Malaysian-Chinese entrepreneur Robert Kuok, is marketing the first listed investment fund targeted at Burma. Kuok made his fortune in sugar, other commodities and hotels such as the Shangri-La group. The fund is being established by Kerry Securities and managed by Kerry Investment Management, the Hong Kong based arm of the Kuok group. It is intended to attract $100 million from institutional investors with possible projects being a $20 million investment in a joint venture with the Burmese-Chinese Ho family based in Thailand. The article named Mr. Halpin Ho as director of the fund and of a company advising its managers. Other proposed investments are in the areas of hotels, plantations, telecommunications, tourism, banking and a deep sea port.

TOTAL SHAREHOLDERS QUESTION PIPELINE INVESTMENT

At the entrance to the May 30 general meeting of shareholders of Total Oil Company in Paris, French NGOs distributed information sheets to shareholders, drawing attention to the advisability and consequences of Total's investment in Burma. The International Federation of Human Rights League (FIDH), Agir-ici, France-Birmanie, and People's Solidarity, cited in the information sheet human rights abuses by the military regime in Burma, particularly the use of forced labor on the construction of the natural gas pipeline in which Total is involved. The NGOs asked the oil company to provide answers to questions such as why Total would enter into contract with an "illegitimate government" and whether their investment only helps to subsidize a "military narco-dictatorship". It is reported that, once inside the meeting, Total management was also questioned by shareholders regarding the firm's activities in Burma.

STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS FILES LEGISLATION

Legislation has been filed in the state of Massachusetts that will prohibit the state from awarding most state contracts for goods and services to companies doing business with or in Burma. It will prohibit the disposition of the Commonwealth's surplus real property, including the granting of easements, to such companies. A hearing date for the Act, "Regulating State Contracts With Companies Doing Business in Burma" sponsored by Representative Byron Rushing, will soon be scheduled. It will then be sent to the House Ways and Means Committee.

NCGUB POSITION PAPER ON GAS PIPELINE PROJECT

The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), Office of the Prime Minister, has produced a position paper on the proposed gas pipeline project and investments by multinational oil companies in Burma. The paper discusses the ecological and social repercussions of foreign investment in this project. It was circulated to various governments, NGOs and international organizations.

COALITION FOR CORPORATE WITHDRAWAL FROM BURMA PLANS ANNUAL MEETING

The Coalition for Corporate Withdrawal from Burma continues its activities around shareholder resolutions filed against US companies PepsiCo, Texaco and Unocal. The Coalition's first annual meeting will be held on August 11, at the Interchurch Center, 475 Riverside Dr., New York City. For further information contact Simon Billenness at Franklin Research & Development Corporation: phone (617) 423-6655 or fax (617) 482-6179.
RESOLUTION ON BURMA

A resolution on Burma was passed by the Council of the Socialist International May 11, 1994 at their annual meeting in Tokyo. The resolution noted with concern the failure of SLORC to transfer power to the elected representatives of the National League for Democracy following the 1990 elections and the exclusion of elected representatives and other ethnic leaders from the National Convention. It calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi; dialogue with her and other ethnic nationalist leaders; the appointing of a UN special envoy; the refraining from renewing foreign assistance and the imposing of a mandatory arms embargo and trade and investment sanctions.

PHYSICIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

A letter writing campaign has been initiated by the Physicians for Human Rights to protest the imprisonment of Dr. Ma Thida, a Burmese physician, writer and political activist, who was arrested in August 1993 for her activities with the National League for Democracy, Dr. Ma Thida was sentenced in October 1993 to 20 years in prison. For more information contact: Physicians for Human Rights, 100 Boylston St., Suite 702, Boston, MA, 02116.

NGO MISSION TO BANGLADESH

Refugees International recently completed a mission to Bangladesh to assess the conditions of refugees from Arakan. Among the findings: refugees continue to be subjected to severe coercion to return home, UNHCR is not adequately staffed to meet protection needs, and refugees fear persecution, forced labor, lack of access to land and lack of documentation should they return. For a copy see Media Resources.

CANADA RECEIVES PRIME MINISTER OF NCGUB

On June 10 the Acting Prime Minister of Canada, Sheila Copps, met with the Prime Minister of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), Dr. Sein Win, and reaffirmed Canada’s support for the Burmese democracy movement. Dr. Sein Win was introduced to the House of Commons by Speaker Gilbert Parent and testified before the Joint Senate-House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Disabled. Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Asia Pacific) Raymond Chan gave assurances that Canada had no intention of encouraging trade with SLORC.

RND TABLES

WASHINGTON, DC — The Burma Roundtable is co-sponsored by Human Rights Watch/Asia, U.S. Committee for Refugees, Jesuit Refugee Service and The International Center. It is a gathering of NGOs, Congressional staff, Administration officials and concerned individuals that meets periodically to discuss human rights, humanitarian assistance and other issues concerning Burma. The meetings are informal and strictly off the record.

The guest speaker for the June 28 meeting was Congressman Bill Richardson of New Mexico who briefed the group on his visit to Burma and his meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi. For further information contact one of the sponsoring organizations listed above.

NEW YORK—Human Rights Watch/Asia hosts periodic Roundtables on Burma in New York City. Information can be obtained through the NY office at phone: (212) 972-8400 or fax: (212) 972-0905. The last meeting was held April 5 and featured David Winters, public health specialist on AIDS for the World Health Organization and Therese Caouette, Research Associate, Human Rights Watch/Asia who presented the Human Rights Watch publication, A Modern Form of Slavery: Trafficking of Burmese Girls and Women into Brothels in Thailand.

MASSACHUSETTS—The Massachusetts Burma Roundtables are hosted by Franklin Research & Development Corporation and are held the second Tuesday of every month. The June meeting featured a video of the recent PBS program, “Rights & Wrongs,” that included a major segment on Burma. The film provides eye witness accounts of human rights violations in parts of Burma where oil companies Unocal and Total plan to build a gas pipeline. For further information contact Simon Billenness of Franklin Research, phone: (617) 423-6655 or fax: (617) 482-6179.

SAN FRANCISCO—Burma Roundtables are held the third Wednesday of every month. For Further information please contact: Jane Jerome, phone: (415)424-8634. E-mail: J.Jerome@IGCAPC.ORG.

LONDON—A Burma Briefing was held on June 9. Guest speakers included Prof. Gerry Stimson discussing his research on behalf of UNDCP regarding the spread of AIDS in Burma, as well as Dr. Zhang Zun and Dr. Shu Wei Xing of Health Unlimited, discussing humanitarian need and assistance to the Kachin on the Burma/China border. For more information on the Burma Briefing forum contact Edmund McGovern, phone: (0392) 876849 or fax: (0392) 876525.

PARIS—The NGO community in France is in the process of organizing a Burma Roundtable to be held in Paris. Further information on that forum will be provided in future issues of BURMA DEBATE.
U.S. BURMA POLICY REVIEW

In June of last year, the Clinton Administration began a review of U.S. Policy toward Burma. On March 10, 1994, a meeting was held by the National Security Council Deputies to review the draft policy. At that time the basic thrust of the policy was approved—that the United States would be more rigorous in trying to promote human rights and democracy in Burma. Several follow-up steps were left pending. According to a State Department official involved in the process, a second NSC meeting is to be scheduled in the near future to reach final approval on the overall policy. It is anticipated that the policy will be officially released before the end of July.

STATE DEPARTMENT SHUFFLE

Key players who deal with Burma within the U.S. Department of State are scheduled for rotation this summer. The Director of the Office of Thailand/Burma Affairs and the Burma Desk Officer in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs as well as the Charge at the U.S. Embassy in Rangoon will be transferred between July and September.

CONGRESSIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS CAUCUS MEETS WITH U.S. CORPORATION REPRESENTATIVES

The Congressional Human Rights Caucus held a meeting with U.S companies investing in Burma on April 14, 1994 to discuss the human rights situation in Burma and the impact of foreign investment. Among the members of Congress who questioned U.S. investors on their activities were Congressman Tom Lantos of California and Congressman John Porter of Illinois, co-chairs of the Caucus, as well as Congressman Bill Richardson of New Mexico and Congressman Neil Abercrombie of Hawaii. Representatives from such companies as Unocal, Liz Claiborne and Texaco attended the meeting.

U.S. INSTITUTE FOR PEACE HOLDS WORKSHOP ON BURMA

The United States Institute for Peace, which receives U.S government funds, hosted a “Workshop on Negotiating Strategies with Burma” on April 11, 1994. Representatives from the U.S. Administration, Congress, the United Nations and the academic community were invited to attend.

CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

Issues concerning asylum seekers from Burma were raised in testimony given at hearings sponsored by:

—Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, House Foreign Affairs Committee (April 16, 1994).

A hearing on Burma and the US Policy Review was held on June 29 before the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, House Foreign Affairs Committee.

NATIONAL COALITION GOVERNMENT OF THE UNION OF BURMA (NCGUB)

The Information Office of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma in Washington DC sponsored a discussion June 1, 1994. Dr. Mya Maung, Professor of Finance at Boston College and Josef Silverstein, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Rutgers University, offered their views on recent developments in Burma, including an analysis of the ceasefire talks, ASEAN and Burma, the National Convention and foreign investment.
The artwork re-produced in this issue of *Surma Debate* is that of Sitt Nyein Aye, age 36, from Mandalay in Upper Burma. He is a graduate of the prestigious State School of Fine Arts and a student of U Aye Kyaw and U Khin Maung, both leading exponents of modern art in Mandalay.

During the 1933 uprising, Sitt Nyein Aye played a major role as the writer and editor of the *Red Galon*, an opposition newspaper with a circulation of 23,000.

Following the military crackdown in September 1933, Sitt Nyein Aye fled to India where he lived in a refugee camp for Burmese students for two years. He currently resides in New Delhi.

For further information on the works of Sitt Nyein Aye contact *Burma Debate*. 