Tourism: Engine for Economic Growth?

In Their Own Words

Forced Labor: Paving the Way for Tourism
TOURISM: ENGINE FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH?

Many governments throughout the world have viewed tourism as a means of generating foreign currency and stimulating economic growth. SLORC, too, hopes that it will bring a massive influx of foreign capital. But will tourism truly be the economic windfall that Burma hopes? And will the benefits it does bring "trickle down" to the majority of people or be held in the hands of a few? Furthermore, tourism does not come without a price. Will its advantages outweigh the disadvantages in terms of social, cultural, and environmental degradation?

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

In September, Ambassador Madeleine Albright, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, became the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Burma since the SLORC took power following the 1988 suppression of the pro-democracy movement. Here she discusses her trip to Rangoon and a course for the international community.

Speaking with foreign journalists in Rangoon, Aung San Suu Kyi gives her views on tourism, its effects on the people, and whether now is the appropriate time for visitors to come to Burma.

FORCED LABOR: PAVING THE WAY FOR TOURISM

Central to the debate surrounding "Visit Myanmar Year - 1996" is the claim that much of what is being done to prepare the country for tourism is being accomplished through the use of forced or prison labor. The United Nations, numerous non-governmental organizations, and members of the media have documented accounts of people who are forced to contribute their labor, or money in lieu of labor, in order to improve the country's infrastructure and refurbish cultural and historic sites that serve as tourist attractions. The Burmese authorities argue that this labor is "voluntary" and an important part of the Buddhist tradition. The question is: Will tourists be able to reconcile the beauties of the country with the reported exploitation of its people?
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BURMA DEBATE
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Since the 1970s, many underdeveloped countries have regarded tourism as a substantial and rapid foreign exchange earner. Frequently, however, it has fallen far short of expectations. This article examines whether tourism truly can be an engine for economic growth and what benefits it can bring to a country. It also suggests a policy for Burma that will minimize tourism’s negative effects.
BY KHIN MAUNG KYI

GOLDEN CITY CO OPERATIVE HOTEL CONSTRUCTION PROJECT MANDALAY CO.OP

YEAR 1996. M.
The SLORC has announced a "Visit Myanmar Year - 1996" with the aim of attracting more visitors to Burma. In the last year, tourist arrivals have increased, but the figure in 1994 was only 47,230, and current estimates suggest it may be under 70,000 this year. Furthermore, tourist arrivals are seasonal.

If the bulk of the targeted 500,000 visitors arrive in the November-February cool season, there will be a shortage of accommodations and other types of infrastructure. A ten-fold increase in visitors is a challenge in itself, but one which this article will not address. Instead, it will concentrate on the objectives, benefits and guidelines for a tourism policy.

**THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF TOURISM**

Earning foreign exchange is essential in the initial stages of economic growth. Most underdeveloped countries thus hope that tourism will generate substantial foreign exchange earnings. They mistakenly believe that construction of hotels and tourism infrastructure, rather than development of industry, will lead to an influx of dollars, that foreign companies will transfer technology in the form of skills associated with tourism, that local handicraft manufacturers will benefit by selling their goods to tourists, and that tourism in general will generate economic growth.

These are the perceived benefits of tourism. Burma, too, hopes to reap. Many developing countries have trod the same path, including those in the Caribbean, Latin America and countries in Asia such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. Hong Kong and Singapore have benefited by producing consumer goods for tourists, selling themselves as transit points, serving as hubs for tour and airline companies and as major centers for shopping.

But others have not been so successful. The first fruits of tourism may have appeared to increase incomes, however, the negative impact of tourism predominated in the long run. Burma could learn from the experience of these countries.

**A RAPID INFLUX OF FOREIGN EXCHANGE?**

Many countries now realize that tourism is not the dollar milk-cow they hoped it would be. Tourism is a capital-intensive industry. Hotels need expensive fittings, equipment and air-conditioners. Modern roads and comfortable salon cars cost money. Expatriate managers expect dollar salaries. Even food and toilet tissue must be imported.

At this point, some might argue "Oh, but the foreign companies will pay." They will also then offset their capital expenses against profits. When calculating the net foreign currency income, money spent to promote and support tourism must be taken into account. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) estimates that for every dollar spent by a visitor, forty to seventy-five cents leaves the country.

In general, developed countries, such as those in Western Europe, Japan, and the United States, are the source of both travellers and travel agencies. They also provide the aircraft or operate airlines that bring the visitors, and the consumer goods that tourists make use of during their stay. Consequently, the countries that benefit most in foreign currency terms from tourism are the ones that send the tourists.

Public money needs to be spent to cater to tourists; namely, on building and upgrading
physical and social infrastructure, accommodations, parks and observation towers. Spending that requires foreign currency and does not benefit the country as a whole must be regarded as part of the costs of tourism. On the other hand, the benefit side of the balance sheet is augmented by purchases of local handicrafts and souvenirs. But the low cost of these generally shoddy products means that the amount of money that remains in the country is negligible in comparison to what goes out.

The WTO has studied the costs and benefits of tourism in several countries and found that in almost half of them, the foreign currency balance sheet showed zero or negative balance. Successful tourism, like other industries, depends on ensuring value-added within the country. In developed countries such as Singapore, value-added is high because goods for tourists, such as electrical items, food and drink, are manufactured domestically, whether directly or under license. The less the domestic production, the greater the need to import items to meet the needs of tourists. This is what prevents countries like Burma and Sri Lanka from enjoying the benefits of tourism.

JOB CREATION?

The second common misconception is that tourism creates local jobs. I mentioned earlier that tourism is a capital-intensive industry. A world class hotel at the cost of approximately 12.7 million USD, will create 200 local jobs, mostly in unskilled occupations such as housekeepers, waiters and bell-boys. But if this capital were invested in an electronics plant or a garment factory, the capital-employment ratio would be much more favorable. A survey of tourism in Sri Lanka found that the creation of a single local job in tourism required an investment of $5,050. Comparable figures for heavy industry and labor-intensive industries were $3,250 and $160 respectively.

Furthermore, unlike manufacturing, most jobs created by tourism are unskilled and seasonal. Rather than concentrating on tourism, countries should encourage the establishment of export-oriented manufacturing industries; thus providing year-round employment for a greater number of people.

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER?

Another myth is that foreign investment in tourism brings with it technology transfer. New hotels do require skilled labor in the form of managers, qualified cooks and professional tour organizers. But unless investment agreements contain clauses stipulating the provision of training for local staff and undertakings to promote local managers within a certain timeframe, few skills will be transferred. Tourism is fundamentally a service industry performed by unskilled and seasonal labor. And the skills it involves are not particularly transferable to other activities.

SUPPORT FOR LOCAL INDUSTRIES?

There is also the mistaken belief that tourism will boost sales and support the local handicraft industry. Tourists may indeed buy local goods. But prices reflect quality. To cater to the demand for cheap souvenirs, host countries may even sell mass-produced imitations of local art, probably imported from outside.

If local handicraft industries are left to fend for themselves and struggle on with outdated equipment and lack of technical know-how, they will not be in place to take advantage of tourism. For example, Burmese lacquerware is of poor quality, both in terms of durability and design, in comparison to the Japanese or Chinese products. Hand-woven Burmese textiles could be exported, but only if their quality and design are improved. Training is needed in both technology and marketing. The producers should be sent abroad to familiarize themselves with the market and should have access to loans to modernize their equipment.

WILL THE COUNTRY BENEFIT ECONOMICALLY?

Some hope that tourism will shore up the rest of the country’s economy. Industrial development generally involves the establishment of related upstream and downstream industries. For example, the mining of iron ore, foundries and casting are upstream industries that support the downstream manufacturing of steel bars and cars. The same is true of the electronics industry. Upstream processes include production of microchips and monitors;
downstream are the programmers and software developers. The processes are interrelated and the development of each depends upon the other.

Tourism, on the other hand, has very few industries which depend on, or are related to it. The tour operators, who are generally found in the countries where the tourists originate, represent upstream activity. And the downstream function of tourism ends with the provision of a service to the visitor. So there are few related businesses.

To conclude, while it may generate foreign exchange and create jobs, tourism is a stand-alone activity, unlikely to generate spin-off development of other industries.

THE DISADVANTAGES OF TOURISM

A genuine analysis of the benefits of tourism requires study of all the costs, financial, social, cultural and environmental. When these are taken into account, the benefits of tourism may well be minimal or even non-existent.

GOLDEN GOOSE OR HEN OUT OF HELL?

Tourism has no beneficial impact on social values. Pleasure or sex tourism is a common occurrence in Southeast Asia and male tourists flock to Thailand and the Philippines, drawn by the promise of sex with Asian girls. Tourism has bolstered the illegal sex industry in these and many other destinations.

The complacent response that: “The sex industry is a by-product of economic underdevelopment. It will disappear once the economy improves,” ignores the unforgiving devastation wreaked by AIDS through the vector of the illegal sex industry. Once HIV infection is established in that segment of the population, its eradication and cure may never be achieved. AIDS kills thousands. The costs of lost economic contribution and medical treatment will stunt the economic growth of the countries most affected. Entire African countries already have been crippled by the disease.

There are those who believe that the sex industry is an inevitable, necessary — and thus acceptable — by-product of tourism. However, the social disruption caused by a growing illegal sex trade is very damaging for a country, as well as for the young girls who, through poverty or naivete, find themselves its victims.

The illegal sex industry has spread to tourist destinations beyond Thailand and the Philippines. A recent survey of sex tourism by the British magazine Charity found that sex tourism now takes place in Sri Lanka and the poor countries of Latin America. As a result, the fear of AIDS has boosted child prostitution, as tourists look to younger and younger children for sex. It is estimated that 200,000 Nepalese girls have been sold into prostitution in India and girls as young as six years old have been forced into the sex tourism industry in Sri Lanka where there are an estimated 15,000 child prostitutes. Meanwhile, nearly 200,000 teenagers participate in the Thai sex industry. According to Charity, sex tourists no longer come from a single Asian country, but from America and across Europe. Sex tourism can only be to the detriment of Burma and the Burmese people.

Of the tourist destinations in Southeast Asia, only Malaysia proscribes its sex industry. Malaysia does
not regard tourism as a development priority. It bases its economic development on industry and agriculture. Tourism is seen as an industry that merely supports other sectors.

DISTORTION OF CULTURAL VALUES

It was once hoped that tourism would stimulate mutual understanding between nations and cultures. Instead, tourists arrive and undertake a short program of sight-seeing and recreation in which inter-cultural understanding takes a back seat. Rather, on experiencing the poverty of the host country, the tourist may well return home with an attitude of condescension.

Foreigners on brief visits may actually contribute to the decay of the country's social fabric. Local young people, ignorant of the world outside, may be enticed to copy the visitors' behavior. Where the visitors behave appropriately, this is not a problem. But the customs and behaviour of the visitors may be very different from a country's own. Or worse, tourists may behave in ways in which they would hesitate to behave at home, perhaps because they perceive that they are among inferiors. For example, I have seen European women walking naked on the beach at Phuket. Local youth may be tempted to mimic the behavior of such tourists.

Tourism can destroy national culture in other ways. Burma should certainly encourage tourists to visit historical attractions such as Pagan. But we need to ensure that historical sites are maintained. Floods of visitors will quickly damage the Thatbinnyu and Ananda Pagodas. Egypt, for example, has found that the humid breath of thousands of tourists is causing the tombs of the Pharaohs to discolor and crack. Our pagodas could suffer the same fate, particularly as they were not built to be as solid as the pyramids. A recent conference in Thailand focused on how to prevent and remedy such occurrences. Burma should quickly review ways to handle these problems.
to look at the capacity of the buildings and discuss how damage can be repaired.

People in Burma already know that tourists like to buy antiques. Many ancient pagodas and monasteries have been destroyed in the pursuit of such treasures and antiques are being carted over to Thailand in growing numbers to meet the demands of tourists.

We can expect this to continue if tourism takes off in Burma. Indonesia, India and Thailand have lost many treasures in this way. Burma must consider how to prevent further losses.

Some people believe that selling local works of art to tourists helps promote our artistic culture. I disagree. Such is the gap between the views of East and West that foreigners, particularly if they lack knowledge of our culture, are rarely able to appreciate the value of local art. They may critique it by the norms of their own cultures, with the result that the local artist may even succumb to producing the sort of garbage that tourists want to buy. Thus our national culture is damaged. In Bali, the dollar-crazed locals have gone so far as to sell out their religion to tourism. Despite their beliefs, they now hold religious ceremonies out of season when this earns them money — a lesson in the bastardisation of culture by international tourism.

Analyses should always take into account the benefits which accrue to the majority and to the country as a whole.

We should begin with a cost-benefit analysis, and accept that tourism will never be a dollar milk-cow. Secondly, we should examine the social impact of every tourism project, taking into account both private and public costs and benefits. If public costs exceed private benefits, we need to calculate how to make tourism pay the balance. Our motto should be: Analyses should always take into account the benefits which accrue to the majority and to the country as a whole.

CORRUPTION

Gambling and prostitution are controlled in many countries. Where these are officially sanctioned in order to earn foreign exchange, the authorities tend to get sucked into corruption and lawlessness. Bribery and drugs attract organised crime. Criminal tentacles may extend to encircle political life until the whole of government and the bureaucracy is corrupted. Such a situation can be seen with the drug cartels in Colombia, and in the booming sex industry in the Philippines under Marcos.

TOURISM WITHOUT TEARS

I may appear unduly pessimistic, and seem to imply that tourism can only damage and not benefit the country. But it should be clear that pursuing tourism solely as a foreign exchange earner is a non-starter.

A free market economy was introduced in Burma five years ago. Since then, only a small proportion of the people have benefited. But the majority should also benefit. Burma should encourage labor-intensive and small industries. Indonesia has raised the living standard of its people over the past decade, not through oil, but through light industry and the manufacture of garments, electronics and shoes.

Burma, too, should establish labor-intensive industries that will both assist the majority and add value within the country. To do this, it needs a management environment and basic infrastructure that will persuade foreign companies to invest. This is the only option. Beyond that, Burma needs to broaden her skills base.

I am not arguing for a halt to the incipient tourism industry in Burma, merely that we should inject a sense of proportion into the debate, and consider what controls may be necessary.

We should begin with a cost-benefit analysis, and accept that tourism will never be a dollar milk-cow. Secondly, we should examine the social impact of every tourism project, taking into account both private and public costs and benefits. If public costs exceed private benefits, we need to calculate how to make tourism pay the balance. Our motto should be: Analyses should always take into account the benefits which accrue to the majority and to the country as a whole.
be: "Make tourism pay." The government has already rightly taken a step in this direction by demanding that every tourist change $300 on entry. In addition, fees should be levied on tourists for the use, upgrading and maintenance of public utilities, cultural and environmental assets (such as forest reserves), and social and physical infrastructure, particularly where the state incurs costs in making them available to tourists.

Thirdly, a policy should be developed that clearly identifies the types of tourism and tourists to be encouraged. There are five basic categories:
1. Business tourists
2. Pleasure, or sex tourists
3. Recreational tourists
4. Ecotourists
5. Culture tourists

Business tourism will depend on economic development in Burma. It should be encouraged and efforts made to provide business visitors with services such as secretarial support and office systems. On the other hand, a policy decision should be taken to discourage pleasure/sex tourism and appropriate laws should be enacted. The problem with recreational tourism is that the distinction between it and pleasure tourism can be very slim. Furthermore, it requires substantial injections of capital to create the necessary beaches, luxury hotels and parks. Apart from Sandoway (Ngapali) and Maungmagan (Tenasserim Division), Burma lacks the wide shallow beaches of Bali and Phuket, which can quickly be developed. And unless such facilities are accessible to locals as well, their development will not be economically viable.

On the other hand, eco-tourism and cultural tourism should be encouraged, as they stand strong chances for success. Control needs to be exerted to ensure that resources, whether tigers or pagodas, are not damaged, and costs are fully taken into account in assessing overall cost-benefit.

Such analyses should always take into account the benefits which accrue to the majority and to the country as a whole. I have already mentioned that the countries that demonstrate greatest benefit and enjoy value-added are those that send visitors. This suggests that Burma should plan how best to maximize its share of foreign exchange. I suggest that one way to do this is to establish tour operators overseas and deal directly with those wanting to visit Burma as ecotourists or culture tourists.

Finally, after discussions with tourism practitioners within and outside the country, Burma needs to adopt a national policy for tourism which takes the above issues into account and incorporates a set of objectives and 'do's and don'ts.'

AN OASIS OR MIRAGE?

The impact of international tourism can be found from the Caribbean to the Pacific. Tourism has been promoted in many, many countries with great fanfare, but without thoughtful preparation. It can turn sour — skyscraper hotels sitting next to squatter camps. We should not recreate the same mistakes in Burma.

I hope this article will help Burma pursue tourism for maximum benefit and minimum cost, and ensure that she does not mistake a mirage for an oasis.

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TRANSLATION BY: Sein Kyaw Hlaing.

NOTES
1. All foreign visitors are required to transfer US$300 or the equivalent into Foreign Exchange Certificates (FECs). These FECs can be used to pay for transport and accommodations or exchanged on the open market for kyats at a rate of approximately $1=6 kyats). Private citizens can deposit FECs into dollar bank accounts in Burma. The government changes 10% of the deposit into kyats at the official rate and therefore effectively benefits at the rate of at least $30 per visitor.

REFERENCES
2. ibid, P.279
On the 25th of September this year, the Irrawaddy Princess, carrying a group of thirty, mainly British, travellers, moored at Katha, 120 miles upriver from Mandalay. Katha is a pleasant little port, ringed by forested hills, on the edge of the Kachin State. During the Second World War, Katha was the last port of call for the original Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. In 1942, in a supreme act of denial to the advancing Japanese, its officers took Bren guns to their Scots-built ships, destroying what had been once the world’s largest inland navigation fleet.

We were the first cruise ship, or indeed tourist group, the residents of Katha had ever seen, and over a thousand people — from Buddhist monks to old ladies — lined the banks to cheer, wave, laugh and joke as only the rural Burmese can. It dawned on us that perhaps we were the objects of interest and the locals were the ‘cultural tourists’. We had brought our human zoo to them.

Photo by Paul Strachan. Reception at Katha.
OR NOT To Go?
was last in Katha in 1986 when it was a military base for Kachin ethnic forces engaged in armed conflict against the central government: the banks were then stacked with munitions and the streets filled with war wounded. Katha has changed considerably since then. A Bosnia-like atmosphere has been replaced with one of small town idyll. In the fields, local farmers now sport Chinese tractors. Women have piped water, saving them many hours of gruelling labor carrying big clay pots on their heads from distant wells. Electricity is widely available and the narrow-gauge train that connects the town to the main Myitkyina line is now working after more than a decade of disrepair. Salon cars are replacing pick-up trucks.

In Katha, people seemed too busy rebuilding their lives after three decades of economic depravation to worry about politics. We had sent no warning of our arrival or informed the government authorities of our itinerary — most of Burma now being open and free for wandering foreigners. Yet the Kathans seemed prepared for us and that night, in a dockside bar, we were presented with locally printed T-shirts bearing the legend “Visit Katha Year 1995.” The bar owner, Ko Zaw, who had had the T-shirts made, was a sort of upriver rocker with a skin head hairdo, sporting lots of medallions and bangles. Clearly no stooge of the SLORC, he explained that the people of Katha wanted tourists. I nodded "Yes, Burma needs dollars." "No! No!" he retorted, "people in Katha want to show tourists their Buddhist sites, to teach them yinchey-hmu (the Burmese term that denotes both manners and culture)."

We came upon similar attitudes everywhere. Unlike the neighboring Thai who call foreigners by the derogatory term farang, the Burmese word for a foreigner is eteh (pronounced "air-theh") or 'guest.' Looking after the eteh is an important part of Burmese culture. After so many years of isolation, the Burmese people, with their innate generosity take great pride and pleasure in caring for eteh, particularly foreign ones.

The nation is at present preparing for "Visit Myanmar Year - 1996" and there is a palpable air of excitement. Perhaps not everyone is quite as high minded as Katha's Ko Zaw, but the general feeling is one of preparing for a big party with lots of special guests. Sadly, many will be disappointed — whilst in Burma "Visit Myanmar Year" is the main tea house topic of conversation, few outside the country are aware of the promotion. (By contrast, in order to promote 'Visit Indonesia Year,' the Indonesian Tourist Authority advertised their campaign on the sides of London buses.) Perhaps it is just as well — the tourist infrastructure in Burma has a long way to go before it can accommodate the million tourists a year hoped for by an optimistic Tourism Ministry.

There are three levels on which Burma is preparing for "Visit Myanmar Year:" the government, the international investors and private Burmese investors. Already the first two have damaged the prospects of a culturally and environmentally sensitive tourism. But so far the damage is mainly confined to Rangoon and Mandalay and perhaps could be averted before the rest of the country is struck by the lure of dollars and zeal.

One of the ancient roles of a Burmese king was to lay down and maintain an infrastructure to enhance the peace and prosperity of the kingdom: roads, canals and channels for river irrigation. The SLORC takes this role most seriously. It quite rightly believes that Burma can modernize with good transport and communications systems and services like grid power and piped water — goals that are being achieved without World Bank loans or international aid. However, the manner in which these improvements are carried out can be ill-informed and thoughtless. An example is the construction of a multi-lane highway (that goes nowhere in particular) through the heart of the World Heritage Site of Pagan. Likewise, the draining of the Mandalay Palace moat and lining of the canal with a singularly unattractive brick and concrete bund, ignores the aesthetic aspects that attract Western tourists. Gone are the grassy banks and lily-clad waters.

The SLORC has boundless energy. In the words of Hemingway, they see themselves as, "Young men saving their country." It seems a great shame that as a result of the Burma boycott, development agencies and specialists with experience in infrastructure projects relating to tourism are not in Rangoon to offer consultancy to these keen young generals. So many of these disasters could be averted if we were talking to the SLORC. The generals do want to get things right.
The irony is, to make way for their towers of concrete and glass, international investors have flattened much of Colonial Rangoon which, after visiting the Shwedagon, is the principal attraction for any visit to a capital city otherwise not very interesting from the Western tourist's perspective. The tourist will thus have little to see or do and want to go travel to other destinations in the country. At present there are approximately 100 plane seats a day to Pagan and little in the way of top-end accommodations there.

The third group preparing for "Visit Myanmar Year" is the local Burmese investors. I use for my example the people of Pagan who I know well, having lived amongst them for six months in 1987. In the days before the SLORC putsch, Pagan folk lived in a traditional village within the walled area of the ancient city. Material possessions were few. The community was considerably more prosperous however, than neighboring Dry Zone villages — thanks to a steady trickle of backpacker tourists who would finance a week in Burma with a carton of 555 cigarettes and a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red. Most people owned a bicycle and occasionally a Honda moped.

In 1990, the SLORC relocated this community to an unprepared site without basic services. The standard of living at Pagan greatly improved. Though foreign tourists were few, with more money around and improved transportation, national tourists started arriving in significant numbers for the first time.

New Pagan, as it is called, is considerably more prosperous than Old Pagan ever was. My friends go to the market in new Japanese cars along paved roads, instead of pushing bikes through drifts of sand. They own refrigerators, so their children are less prone to disease. Air conditioners are being installed in proudly built new houses. Several of my friends can now afford to send their children to college in Meiktila or Mandalay. My old saya, U Aung, last month flew to Rangoon for a medical check-up, something unimaginable in 1987. The profits from this national tourism are being sensibly reinvested...
in the construction of new improved guest houses and family-run hotels. The people of Pagan too, are waiting for the foreign tourists.

Mistakes have been made that will ultimately make the country less attractive to the tourist. In our itineraries we feel obliged to offer quick drives through central Mandalay just to reassure the clients that they are not missing anything in that most romantic sounding of towns. I am perhaps more annoyed with Kipling for raising expectations about this place than with the Chinese property developers who are quickly destroying any charm the town may have held. In Mandalay the destruction is in the name of commerce rather than cultural tourism.

It would be imperialistic of us, however, to impose our aesthetic values on those who now own Mandalay. Likewise it would be equally imperialistic to try to criticize the circumstances of a people in punishment for what we perceive as the errors of their rulers. Whether at Katha or Pagan, the Burmese people should be listened to by those who seek a boycott on tourism. The cry of the ordinary Burmese seems to be unanimous — they want the tourists. Those who advocate that one should not go might put a little bit of the democracy they preach into practice and ask the people.

As Ko Zaw at Katha pointed out, tourism is not just a question of dollars, but also the reassurance of outside contact and the pleasures of interchange with those from other lands. If camcorder-wielding tourists had been around in 1988, matters might have been different. Rangoon now has a growing expatriate community (the French oil company, Total, has over 30 families resident there), visas are issued on arrival at the airport and there are few stay restrictions. The SLORC is under far greater foreign scrutiny than during the Ne Win regime: they have learned restraint.

Each morning my mail includes one or two postcards bearing a manacled convict laboring as part of a chain gang. There is the famous Kipling quote (which is misspelt) set across the image. Chain gangs were a colonial British innovation and are still commonplace in neighboring India (the world’s largest democracy) as they are in many states of the USA. The chains are of British design and still manufactured by a firm in the English Midlands. I have no information as to whether the convict depicted is a criminal prisoner (perhaps a rapist or murderer) or an intellectual-turned-dissident. On one TV documentary we were shown an example of corvee labor — a row of volunteer merit earners sweeping the Shwedagon pagoda platform! Such images have dominated the Burma debate and are highly manipulative — propaganda that matches the SLORC’s in its crassness.

It seems cruelly hypocritical that well-meaning Westerners should arrogantly refuse the Burmese people the means for all the comforts — like fridges, medicines and the chance to go to college — that they take for granted.
so much at the hands of Americans, it is politically
correct to go there and be an investor or tourist —
but not to Burma. Yet unlike Vietnam, judicial exe-
cutions in Theravada Buddhist Burma are unknown.
I often wonder if these well-meaning people have
been to Burma recently, if at all, and discussed these
matters with the locals?

In fifteen years of acquaintance with the coun-
try, I have never known Burma so prosperous
as it is now. Last time Burma boomed it was
under the Raj, now she booms again under a
different kind of colonialism — the ‘foreign
investor.’ It is sad to see the splendid old buildings
go, but heartening to find a healthier, happier
Burma. A buzz has replaced the stagnation of pre-
’90s Rangoon — people are busy doing things.

When I first arrived in Burma in 1980, half of the
country was out of bounds due to widespread insur-
gency and people made a living out of recycling old
plastic bags. It was so xenophobic that the sight of a
foreigner passing in a car would cause a stir. Now a
foreigner can travel almost anywhere and imported
goods are cheaper in Rangoon than Singapore.

The SLORC may not be forgiven for what hap-
pened in ‘88, but as people build new lives and enjoy
the benefits of a comfortable prosperity, they may
choose to forget. The door is at long last open, and
just as foreigners can come, Burmese can leave.
Satellite dishes adorn the gable of many a house,
where Star-TV and BBC effectively has ended the
government’s embargo on news.

There are various kinds of freedoms. Through-
out history ‘free trade’ has always been the first step
to other freedoms. It would seem a perversion to
deny the Burmese such betterment. Tourism is a
necessary evil.

Paul Strachan has spent extended periods of time in
Burma since he first visited the country in 1980 and
has travelled extensively through areas rarely acces-
sible to foreigners. His company, Kiscadale Pub-
lications, has published over 20 titles on Burma
including Pagan: Art and Architecture and
Mandalay: Travel from the Golden City. This year, Mr.
Strachan resurrected the old Irrawaddy Flotilla Co.,
which takes small groups on expeditionary cruises on
the upper Irrawaddy.

AND ANOTHER TRAVELER WRITES...

As a foreigner who first came to Myanmar as a
tourist, then became so interested in the
country that I decided to study the language
and culture at university, I think I am qualified to com-
ment on the many attractions of the ‘Golden Land’ and
to put forward my views on the preparations for ‘Visit
Myanmar Year - 1996’ as I watch the country opening up
and actively seeking to welcome visitors from abroad

...Despite progressive privatization measures and
more outward-looking gestures at a national level, local
officials are slow to follow up such changes. Bureaucratic
red tape still hinders tourist travel to supposedly ‘author-
rized’ out-of-the-way places. Even with the correct papers
and permits, foreigners are routinely subjected to a less-
than-courteous reception by uniformed and plainclothes
agents. Military inspectors — not known for making a
favorable impression as goodwill ambassadors — harass
foreign visitors at train stations, at river crossings, at tea
shops. On a recent trip to a regional city in Upper
Myanmar, I, myself, was repeatedly stopped by officers
of three different bureaux, all too eager to assert their
authority. Although I was the only visible foreign face in
town and nothing could have been easier than tracking
my whereabouts, twice a day or more they questioned
me — What was I doing here? Whom did I talk to? How
many photographs did I take? Of what? I was annoyed
to say the least and cut short my stay. If this was how a
single foreigner was handled, how would the local police
and others cope with 50 to 100 tourists arriving each day
during ‘Visit Myanmar Year - 1996’?

An observer of things Myanmar,
Yangon, April 1995
IN THEIR OWN WORDS: MADELEINE K. ALBRIGHT

BURMESE DAZE

BY MADELEINE K. ALBRIGHT

A extraordinary human and political drama is being played out in Burma. At center stage is the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), a hydra-headed military junta that has dominated the country since repressing a democratic uprising six years ago. Sharing the spotlight is the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Prize-winning leader of the pro-democracy forces, daughter of the founder of modern Burma, Aung San. Observing intently, but almost silently, are Burma's educators, professionals and ordinary citizens, scarred by the past and wary about promises of a better future.

The unresolved question is whether the SLORC will release the stranglehold it has imposed on Burmese political life and allow real freedom. In September, I became the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Burma since the junta took power. I went to remind the SLORC that a fundamental change in its relationship with the United States will occur only when there is a fundamental change in its relationship with the Burmese people. I also went to express American solidarity with Aung San Suu Kyi.

Shortly after my arrival in Rangoon on September 8, in a huge room adorned with tulips, teapots and elephant tusks, I sat down with Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt. He is the chief of SLORC intelligence and the government's interlocutor of choice with Western officials. The general began our discussion with a verbal jog through his country's unsettled past. He argued that outsiders (like myself) cannot appreciate the three factors that set Burma apart from its democratic neighbors: its Buddhist culture; its ethnic diversity; and the special role the military has played over the forty-seven years since the country gained its independence. He claimed that the military had saved the country from chaos on three occasions, in 1958, 1962 and 1988, the last time by rescuing Burma from a fate worse than Bosnia's by imposing peace upon anarchic, Communist-inspired mobs.

Ignoring for the moment this distortion of history, I informed the general that the purpose of my visit was to talk about the future, not the past. Whatever the perceived justification for its earlier actions, the SLORC now faces an historic choice between the status quo and a democratic transition. The general insisted that the SLORC's approach is the best way to guarantee stability and that the Burmese people support its efforts to rebuild the economy and ensure law and order. "Even at midnight," he said, "you can walk around town without danger; that is why the Burmese people have such happy faces." I replied that during a lifetime of studying repressive regimes I had found the smiling quotient in many of them to have been quite high. Authoritarian leaders often delude themselves that they are loved, but the smiles they see are usually prompted not by affection, but fear.

The next morning, I met Aung San Suu Kyi for breakfast at her lakeside home. This is the place to which she had returned from England in 1988 to care for her dying mother; where she had soon thereafter written her first political speeches; and where — until her release this past July — she had spent almost six years under house arrest. In our discussion, Aung San Suu Kyi called for a dialogue between the pro-democracy forces and the SLORC. Asked when that dialogue should start, she referred to an old SLORC slogan: "Precisely, Correctly, Quickly."

I was struck, during our conversation, by her seeming contradictions. Outwardly fragile, she is clearly very strong; outwardly serene, her reserves of patience have worn thin; obviously determined, she avoids confrontation and seeks reconciliation. In the room where we had breakfast, there hangs an immense photograph of Aung San. Other photos show him surrounded by his family, including a 2-year-old girl with deep piercing eyes. Aung San was assassinated in 1947 at the age of 32, but today it is Aung San Suu Kyi, and not the SLORC, who represents Burmese national identity and pride. In the last
thirty years, only she and the movement she leads have received a mandate from Burma's people.

For years, controversy has surrounded programs conducted within Burma by United Nations agencies, including UNICEF and the UN Development Program. Their efforts raise a classic policy dilemma: how to help people living under despotism without helping the despots themselves. In Burma, most UN agencies walked the line by funneling their assistance directly to people in need. I visited UNICEF projects that clearly meet this criterion: a school, a health center and a potable water project. Nevertheless, local UN officials admitted the difficulty of carrying out effective development work in the face of government efforts to turn that work to its own advantage.

What, then, is Burma's future? How will the drama play out? How, for example, will the SLORC respond to Aung San Suu Kyi's recent visit to a dissident monk; to her hosting a student political event over SLORC objections; and to her party's decision to reappoint her general-secretary in apparent contravention of a SLORC decree?

If donor countries deny the SLORC international respectability and development assistance, its leadership is more likely to acquiesce in this gradual enlargement of political space. Unlike kleptocracies elsewhere, the SLORC genuinely views itself as the guardian of Burma's economic future, however contemptuous it remains of political freedom. Over time, it may have to admit the connection between economic growth and political reform.

The United States should expedite this realization. Poverty in Burma is endemic, development spotty, the foreign debt is $5.5 billion. Most farming, road repair and construction is done with equipment many years out of date. Western capital has helped other Southeast Asian economies to expand. And so it is no wonder that SLORC seeks foreign investment and international loans. But the U.S. has stopped its economic assistance program and urged others to do the same.

Next year, the SLORC will launch a massive tourism campaign. It will offer the world breathtaking scenery, visits to fabled Mandalay, beautiful Buddhist temples, ancient palaces, picturesque lakes and unique hand-crafts. But the roads and sights they are invited to see will have been refurbished through the sweat and toil of forced labor. Democracies should be ashamed to encourage their businesspeople to be "first in Burma," for this would provide the SLORC with the booty it needs to resist mounting pressure for a political opening. "Constructive engagement" must be, in fact, "constructive." International banks must not bail the SLORC out. And economic sanctions — especially in strategic industries — should neither be discarded nor triggered rashly, but rather kept in reserve.

The world should have faith, like Aung San Suu Kyi, in the strength of the democratic forces of Burma. Despite their poverty, the Burmese are sophisticated, highly literate people, who have learned from bitter experience that justice, law and political rights are essential to national development. In an ethnically diverse country, a strong sense of national pride has survived. According to the cliche, dictators ride on tigers' backs; either they stay on top or they are eaten. But recent experience belies this. Peaceful transitions to democracy have occurred on five continents. If the SLORC sincerely wants to build a multiparty democracy, it should go ahead. This can be done, in the SLORC's favorite phrase, "systematically"; but it should begin soon and must not take forever. After all, South Africa — with problems at least as intractable — went from apartheid to Nelson Mandela's inauguration in less than five years.

Vaclav Havel, who endorsed Aung San Suu Kyi for the Nobel Peace Prize, has told me many times how important it was for those struggling to bring freedom to Eastern Europe to know that they had friends and supporters around the globe. It is essential now that democratic forces abroad maintain solidarity with those pursuing change in Burma. The SLORC has a choice — one road leads to isolation and ultimately to disaster; the other to respect and participation in the region's economic miracle. Half measures or phony measures (such as the SLORC-orchestrated National Convention) are not enough. The SLORC must choose. If it does, the United States will help and so will others. And Burma may become a model of the successful transition from tyranny to democracy, for its neighbors and for the world.

MADELEINE K. ALBRIGHT is U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations. This article first appeared in the December 4, 1995 issue of The New Republic and is reprinted with permission.
The following excerpts are from a meeting between Aung San Suu Kyi and foreign journalists in Rangoon on November 17, 1995. The conversation was taped and transcribed for Burma Debate.

PRESS • My question has to do with tourism and "Visit Myanmar Year - 1996." The government has been making a great deal of effort to attract tourists and foreign investment. In fact, foreign investment and tourism are related industries... in the country right now. The people I've been speaking to in the north say that it's a kind of double edge sword because, of course, they're aware that the money, the foreign currency, is strengthening the government but they appreciate that they're actually getting the "trickle down" effect.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI • There is another aspect to that as well. It is forced labor that has been imposed on the people in order to make the place as it were, "respectable," in quotes, for the tourists. And that is a matter of great concern, because people are made to build roads, build bridges and, in many towns, people are made to replace their wooden or bamboo fences with brick walls. This is in order to impress tourists. And there are some places where they are even made to replace
the wooden fronts of their houses with brick facades if they could not afford to rebuild the whole house in brick. This means a lot of hardship for the people, and I doubt that any of those people who have to contribute labor or who have to spend a lot of money, between their walls and houses, really get anything back from the tourist industry.

PRESS • So the NLD [National League for Democracy] basically would say to tourists, "Stay away?"

ASSK • Well, we think it is too early for either tourists or investment or aid to come pouring into Burma. We would like to see that these things are conditional on genuine progress towards democratization.

PRESS • What are the kinds of conditions the government would have to fulfill before this international boycott of the country can be lifted and aid and business and tourism should pour in?

ASSK • Well, they should show respect for the [United Nations] General Assembly resolution. The General Assembly resolution of 1994 spells out what is necessary before it can be seen that Burma is really on the road to democratization. So, I think the clauses of that resolution should be implemented before we can take it that the government is really on the road to democratization.

PRESS • But I think that some tourists are coming, and I saw in Loikaw just exactly [the things] you have explained... but you have to know, when I'm a visitor here I don't see as much as I expected. Aren't you concerned that the people who are coming here get the wrong idea and say well, the press is wrong or something like that?

ASSK • Well, if they get the wrong idea, then, somebody should put them right because tourists don't get anywhere... for example, where have you been in Rangoon?

PRESS • The suburbs, outside...

ASSK • And where else?

PRESS • Just across the river. I rode down to the townships where people were displaced a few years ago...

ASSK • Yes, but a lot of people don't go there. When tourists come here they go to the Shwedagon Pagoda... they go to the pagoda at Pegu. Mind you, if you go to Pegu by car you will see the roads are very bad. But [the tourists] live in hotels, they go around in air-conditioned taxis, they don't see anything of what is going on in the country. They know nothing of the situation of people in the rural areas, [who] are the backbone of the country. Eighty percent of our people live in the countryside. And it's whether or not they are well off which decides whether the country is developing or not. We, the NLD, make a point of saying that real development in a country must be measured by the standards of health and education; and I think you can find data, independent data which has nothing to do with us; United Nations data, which will show that government spending on health and education has not gone up. As I understand it, in the 1993 UN Human Development Report, the government was spending 150 times on defense what it was spending on health and education. And in the 1994 report it had gone up 222 times. So, we cannot see that there is development. Apart from that, UNICEF data shows that the dropout rate at the primary school level is rising in the country, so that certainly does not show development, espe-
daily as UNICEF thinks... UNICEF comes to the conclusion that the reason why children are dropping out of school is because the families are getting poorer and this is the great majority of our people.

PRESS • Do you see anything [in] 'alternative tourism,' that is, small groups who are informed...?

ASSK • Well, I think that visitors to the country can be useful, depending on what they do, or how they go about it. But I think also, tourists have to be careful not to deceive themselves; if they want to see the country, they can find all sorts of excuses for doing so. But what they have to understand is how far their visits really go to help the people. You go a long way towards deceiving yourself. You can talk about 'trickle down' effect, but sometimes the trickle down effect is exactly that, a mere trickle, which dissipates before it gets to where it's required.

PRESS • There have been the reports in the Western press about the issue of forced labor... do you have the feeling that it's gotten worse... since the beginning of the year?

ASSK • Well, certainly, a lot of forced labor is in the interest of attracting tourists. It's... one could say, it's this "Visit Myanmar Year" which is responsible for a lot of forced labor because it's for roads and bridges, as I said earlier, for building up the facades that will look impressive to tourists.

PRESS • Has the situation worsened since the beginning of the year?

ASSK • It's going on, I mean, the same projects are going on. So there certainly has been no let-up on preparations for welcoming, in quotes, "the tourists."

PRESS • When you say forced labor, just to clarify, you mean suggesting that [people] donate their time for...?

ASSK • Well, maybe it's not suggesting. Telling them to donate their time, if they cannot give the time they have to donate money instead. Only last week we were informed that in Hlaing Tharyar, which is one of the satellite townships, they were being asked to labor for a new road or perhaps for rebuilding an old road. And those families... those households which cannot provide labor have to give 650 kyats each. That's a lot for people who don't have money, you know, who barely have enough to live on.

PRESS • I've heard that the new railway line that's being built between Nyaung-U and Myin-Gyan, on the way to Pagan, that there's forced labor being used on that railway, very specifically as a tourist project. Do you have any details on that?

ASSK • No, we've just heard what you have. I think the same conditions apply there as anywhere else in Burma where there's forced labor. If you can't supply labor you have to supply money instead. And lots of people can't afford money. But then, sometimes people have their own work to do. If they are farmers they have their own land to tend to, and in order that they may tend to their land, they have to give money instead. And that of course is very difficult. It means that sometimes they run into debt because they've got to borrow the money to pay towards forced labor or voluntary labor, or whatever they like to call it, in order that they might be free to work their own land, because that's their livelihood.

PRESS • If tourists do come, what would you tell them to do? What would be the picture of Burma you'd like them to see?

ASSK • I think we would be much more clear cut in our policies. If we think there is reason for us to say to the tourist, "Please don't come," we shall say so.
PRESS • But say they do come. What would you say if they just get to see the Shwedagon, Pagan... they don't really understand what is going on...

ASSK • Well then, we'll have to ask somebody to bring out an alternative guide to Burma. [Editor's note: See Media Resources, p. 34]

PRESS • Are you worried about the cultural effects tourism will have on society?

ASSK • That is connected to the political and economic situation, which will effect and influence the social attitudes of the people. I think if you want a people to preserve their culture, you've got to make them feel proud of themselves. You've got to make them feel that they can hold their heads up in the world. If people do not have confidence in themselves, they will lose their culture because they will think other people are better. If they're poorer, if they have to depend on foreigners for a little trickle of whatever is going in, then they will lose confidence with themselves. If they lose confidence with themselves, that means they will no longer value their own culture. The reason why a lot of young people are taking to wearing foreign clothes is because they think that's trendy and they think that shows that they're affluent. It's a sign of a lack of confidence in themselves and in their own country and in their own culture. You cannot preserve a culture by flat. The people have to feel that their culture is valuable, that it's worth preserving. If they do not feel it's worth preserving, no amount of laws is going to make them preserve it. It will get eroded away in no time at all.

PRESS • Is there a positive side to tourism?

ASSK • Of course there is a positive side to everything, provided it's handled in the right way. Tourists can open up the world to the people of Burma just as the people of Burma can open up the eyes of tourists to the situation in their own country if they're interested in looking. But if the people of Burma simply come to see tourists as a source of ready money... then I do not know how much the tourist will be able to help the Burmese people, apart from scattering a few dollars around.

PRESS • Some things about Mandalay... I went on the boat to Mingun as a tourist and saw that there were plots of land cleared on the bank... another form of relocation. What are they going to do there? Is it another hotel site? It looks like the worst of both systems, of a nationalized system and a free economy....

ASSK • Well, one hopes there is a method to the madness. They seem to be clearing land right, left and center and I think in some cases they want to put up hotels, in other areas they seem to want to turn farming land into settlements, new settlements, which means they bring out people from the cities and settle them on those lands. Whereas in those city areas that are cleared, they put up hotels and department stores. It all seems to come back to hotels in the end.

PRESS • But about Mandalay specifically, do you have any information... about the Irrawaddy river bank?

ASSK • Yes, I think the Irrawaddy river bank has been cleared away for the sake of the tourist so it all looks very nice and clean.

PRESS • Back to forced labor, I just wanted to get your response to a comment I got from the government, which said that they weren't forcing people, that foreigners didn't understand this labor thing because it was the Buddhist way, that people wanted to work because they were gaining merit.

ASSK • I've never heard that it was the Buddhist way that if people were not prepared to work, they had to give money instead. That does not seem a very Buddhist way to me.
The following is excerpted from a report to the United Nations General Assembly prepared by Mr. Yozo Yokota, Special Rapporteur of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights.

REPORT BY THE UNITED NATIONS
SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR -
OCTOBER 16, 1995

SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN MYANMAR

Photographs that appear here are not part of the U.N. report.
Above: Prison labor working tourist site, Mandalay hill.

Below: Road building.

Right: Woman construction worker, Mandalay.
The Myanmar Government reportedly made extensive use of various forms of forced, unpaid labour for a variety of development projects aimed at building the infrastructure of the country. Various sources have reported an especially extensive use of forced labour in relation to several completed or ongoing railway construction projects. Railway lines under present construction are, reportedly: the Pakokku-Gangaw-Kalay-Kalemyo-Tamu line, the Pakokku-Myaing-Gangaw-Kalay line and the Ye-Tavoy line. People are allegedly not only forced to contribute their labour to these and other projects, but also to contribute materials. No compensation is said to be paid by the Government. For example, in Zin Kalee area, it was reported that people were asked to bring 24 tins of rice, 100-150 kyats in cash, pick-axes, mattocks and hoes. Some people had to obtain these tools by selling their clothing and other properties. It was further reported that civilian trucks were conscripted and never paid for, and all workers had to spend their own money for food and transportation. The labourers also had to combine their resources to pay for the rental of bulldozers. In addition, those who were assigned to night-shift duty had to rely on their own resources for electricity.

The Myanmar Government has proclaimed 1996 as "Visit Myanmar Year." Although this could be viewed as a general sign of the opening up of the country, human rights concerns have been expressed. Many of the measures that the Government has taken to prepare the country for foreign tourists reportedly constitute violation of human rights. Forced labour has allegedly been used to restore some of the tourist sights (e.g. Mandalay Palace) and to upgrade the infrastructure (e.g. railways, roads and airports). For example, it is alleged that people working for "The Mong Kwan Electric Power Plant" (which is being constructed approximately 10 miles south of Kengtung in Eastern Shan State) are expected to contribute as many as 60 days labour for the project throughout the year. It is further reported that they are also expected to provide their own food.

In connection with the recent conflicts between the Myanmar Army and insurgent groups in Karen state, several sources have reported an increase of forced portering for the military. The Army has reportedly rounded up porters of all ethnic and religious backgrounds from villages and towns as far south as Mon state. The porters are said to have been taken from the streets, trains, movie theaters and even from their homes. The reports on portering allege physical abuse, appalling living conditions and arbitrary killings of porters who are unable to perform their tasks. For example, a former farmer from Grit Kote village, Pauk Kong Township, Pegu division, who allegedly escaped from portering, described how he had been arrested together with 10 other people from the same village by local Infantry Battalion No.66 on his way back from a video show. According to his testimony, there were about 200 porters when they started moving from Thaton, including 15 women. When they reached Papun, they were ordered to carry food supplies (60 kilograms of rice rations), munitions and artillery shells.

The Special Rapporteur would appreciate receiving the Government's response to the above allegations indicating what measures have been taken to comply with the obligations under International Labour Organization (ILO) convention No.29 prohibiting the practice of forced portering and other forced labour and what rights of redress are available to victims of such practices.
RESPONSE OF THE GOVERNMENT OF MYANMAR TO THE
MEMORANDUM OF THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR

Allegations of Forced Labour

Since Myanmar regained independence in 1948, various armed groups have been engaged in armed conflict against successive Governments. Basing themselves in remote and relatively inaccessible areas, these armed groups have terrorized and endangered the lives of ordinary citizens of the nation. In order to protect the lives and property of the civilians, and in order to maintain peace and security, the Armed Forces of Myanmar have had to launch military operations against the armed groups. Since the terrain inhabited by the armed groups is mountainous and thickly forested, many places are not accessible to motorized vehicles and the Armed forces have had to recruit civilian labourers. The use of labourers in Myanmar has been practiced since the time of colonial rule, during which time laws in connection with this were promulgated by the colonial rulers. Following independence, successive Governments have continued this practice according to the law.

Recruitment and employment of civilian labourers are in accordance with the Village Act of 1908 and the Town Act of 1907, and is based on the following three criteria:

(a) They must be unemployed;
(b) They must be physically fit;
(c) They must be paid a reasonable amount of wages, fixed and agreed upon beforehand.

The labourers must be paid from the time they leave their respective homes until they return, on completion of their duty. Apart from daily wages, they are

Novotel construction site, Mandalay.
entitled to receive rail and steamer travelling warrants or cash to cover the actual cost of transport between their homes and the operation area. The respective military unit has the responsibility of providing accommodation, messing and medical cover for the recruited labourers. Daily wages must be commensurate with those prevailing in the areas. They are never required to accompany the troops to the actual scene of battle, nor are they exposed to danger. In the unlikely event of loss of life or limb, they or their families are compensated in accordance with the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1923.

...It has always been a tradition in Myanmar culture to donate labour in the building of pagodas, monasteries, roads and bridges and in the digging and clearing of wells, ponds, dams and canals. A belief exists that doing so leads to mental and physical well-being. Those who can afford to donate money do so while those who cannot, donate their labour. This is all part of community work that raises the standard of living, both materially and spiritually. As such, the local populace, members of the local military units, government servants, as well as members of the armed groups who have returned to the legal fold, participate enthusiastically and conscientiously. United Nation agencies, foreign and local non-governmental organizations are also involved in these projects. The local populace is already enjoying the benefits of their own endeavours.

For their contribution towards community development, remuneration is given to the workers either on a piece-rate basis, or at prevailing wage rates. In some cases, the authorities disburse a lump sum of money to be used for the benefit of the whole community.

...The development projects undertaken by the Government are solely for the benefit of the people of the region. It is the people who live in the area and who have contributed labour who directly enjoy the fruits of their endeavours.

It would of course be ideal if the Government did not have to depend upon the labour contribution of the local populace in order to complete the projects in their respective areas. Lacking sufficient financial resources to complete independently projects that would bring development and progress to areas that would otherwise remain undeveloped, the Government has had to rely on the means available in order to improve the lives of the people. The Government does pay for contributed labour as far as its financial resources permit, and in accordance with prevailing local rates. If the Government did not try to raise the standard of living of the people with the means at its disposal, the people would remain victims of the circumstances in which they would otherwise be bound forever, unable to raise their standard of living.

There are other projects taking place in Myanmar beside those pertaining to the improvement of infrastructure. Construction of hotels, business and commercial centres, and development of holiday resorts constitute some of the projects taken on as joint ventures, with either local or foreign companies. Work is undertaken by private construction companies who hire and employ workers of their choice. These companies operate within the bounds of a market economy and have to pay the workers competitively. As for the renovation of monuments of importance to Myanmar's cultural heritage, the work is so specialized that only highly skilled workers can be used. These workers command premium rates. Thus, allegations that forced labour is used in projects that promote tourism and international trade have no basis of truth.

The ILO Committee of Experts has taken note of the conclusions and recommendations made by the Tripartite Committee set by the Governing Body to examine the representation made by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), alleging non-observance by Myanmar of the Forced Labour Convention No. 29. The Committee of Experts has accordingly expressed the hope, with regard to public works projects as well as regarding porterage services, that the powers vested in the authorities under the Village Act and the Town Act will be repealed.

...Consequently, the Government of Myanmar, in compliance with the request from the Governing Body, to ensure that the relevant legislative texts, in particular, the Village Act and the Town Act, are brought in line with the Convention and to ensure that formal repeal of powers to impose compulsory labour be followed up in practice and that those resorting to coercion in the recruitment of labour be punished, has started the process of amending those two laws.
For example, we can confirm that shackled prison laborers, under the watchful eyes of the armed military guards, performed the bulk of the renovation of the Mandalay moat. Moreover, Mandalay residents, whose only crime was living close to the work project site, were forced to work in the muck-choked moat under the boiling sun; many of these "volunteers" were elderly merchants. Recently, as well, prison gangs have begun renovation of the Atumashi Monastery, a popular tourist spot in Mandalay. Even on Mandalay Hill, a center of Burmese Buddhism and a famous tourist destination at sunrise and sunset, chained prisoners have been used extensively to upgrade facilities. The introduction of prison labor at Mandalay Hill roughly coincided with the establishment of a hard currency entrance fee for the Western tourists, so the message seems clear that the upgrade is geared toward the expected tourist crowds in 1996. (Interestingly, no fee is charged for ethnic Asians.)

In other areas of Burma, as well, there are frequent and credible complaints about the military junta's effort to accelerate development in preparation for the self-proclaimed "Visit Myanmar Year — 1996." There is no question in our minds that the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) has greatly stepped up its use of corvee labor to assist in the construction of not only roads and bridges in the hinterlands, but also tourist destinations in central Burma. We do not necessarily believe that a boycott of this beautiful country is the appropriate response at this time, but it is essential for the informed travelers to understand that the SLORC's hunger for hard currency contributes greatly to this disturbing trend.

As long-time foreign residents of Rangoon (Yangon) we have seen the charm and kindness of ordinary Burmese citizens, and we have grown to love the gentle beauty and exotic scenery of this resource-rich nation. Through frequent travels in the countryside, we have also seen and experienced the effects of the military junta's effort to accelerate development in preparation for the self-proclaimed "Visit Myanmar Year — 1996." There is no question in our minds that the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) has greatly stepped up its use of corvee labor to assist in the construction of not only roads and bridges in the hinterlands, but also tourist destinations in central Burma. We do not necessarily believe that a boycott of this beautiful country is the appropriate response at this time, but it is essential for the informed travelers to understand that the SLORC's hunger for hard currency contributes greatly to this disturbing trend.
junta's highhanded and reckless efforts to "develop" or "upgrade" provincial towns. In a number of Shan State tourism centers, residents along the main avenues have been forced to replace their traditional wooden homes with houses constructed of brick or concrete. Those who are unable to do so have been forced out — all in the name of progress. Aside from the financial and social hardships presented by this policy, safety concerns also have been overlooked. The materials used in these new homes are notoriously weak, and in a country with a history of strong earthquakes, this is one area where traditional methods are best.

We have heard that corvee labor has been widely used in the construction of new rail lines, as well as the repair of old lines. Likewise, government road construction efforts have largely been on the backs of ordinary Burmese villagers forced to provide labor under rigorous conditions without compensation. Villagers in these areas spread stories of high casualty rates among laborers, stemming from disease, overwork, malnutrition, and physical abuse. [Editor's note: Since this article was written, we have been told that the SLORC has begun construction of a 40 mile rail spur from Myin-Gyan to Pagan, using forced labor from households in Myin-Gyan.]

Lest the traveler think that such human rights abuses only take place in off-limits upcountry locales, there are also harrowing stories of a forced labor camp established near Rangoon to support the reconstruction of the main highway leading north from the capital to the popular day-tripper's destination of Pegu (Bago). Many observers contend that in filling these camps, military troops actively target ethnic minority groups, including the Karen, Indians, and Chinese.

Religious discrimination also appears to be on the upswing, and again this seems timed with the preparations for "Visit Myanmar Year - 1996" and the government's efforts to portray Burma as a harmonious Buddhist nation. In the Kachin State, north of Myitkyina, for example, the military seized land from a Kachin Baptist organization for the construction of a new pagoda. Residents of the area — predominately Christian — have been forced not only to provide labor, but also to pay "special taxes" for the pagoda construction. Even in downtown Myitkyina, the military has been using prison labor for the construction of a Buddhist ordination hall. There are reports in other towns, as well, that Christian villagers have been forced to support the construction of Buddhist temples, only to be coerced later into giving alms to the monks moved there by the government. Any well-informed tourist should understand that Burma is a country of many ethnic groups, many religions, and many unique cultures. The SLORC's efforts to "Burmanize" the country through the accelerated construction of Buddhist facilities in minority areas simply fan flames of mistrust and suspicion which were present long before independence in 1948.

Burmese officials deny that corvee labor is used. They are correct that in Burmese culture, people often contribute labor; but this is Burmese Buddhist culture, and it refers to voluntary labor for the construction of religious edifices. The goal of this labor is the accruement of Buddhist "merit." Burmese Buddhists forced to construct a government highway; Kachin Baptists coerced into paying for a pagoda on their own land; Karen Baptists pressed to clear dense jungle for a new road; Indian Roman Catholics forced to break rocks to widen a major road — these are not examples of traditional culture and no tourist should allow himself to be convinced of that by glossy, government-produced tourism brochures or the hollow statements of cynical government bureaucrats.

Come to Burma, if you feel it is the right thing to do. But come with an open mind, talk to ordinary villagers, and learn to distinguish those elements of "traditional Myanmar culture" that have been fabricated by the SLORC from the reality of a fascinating and beautiful multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual nation. And whenever possible, ensure that your tourist dollar goes directly to private entrepreneurs and townpeople, not the junta.

As residents of Rangoon, living near the watchful eyes of the xenophobic SLORC, we regretfully must withhold our names from publication.

"Friends of the Burmese People"
WASHINGTON, DC — A Burma Roundtable was held in Washington on October 4 with guest speaker Sonam Yangchen of the Bureau of Program and Policy Support at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in New York. Ms. Yangchen reported on her August 1995 trip to Burma where she visited UNDP programs and observed NGO operations.


NEW YORK — The New York Roundtable met on November 20 to discuss the reconvening of the National Convention in Rangoon and its implications for the 1995 General Assembly resolution on Myanmar. Guest speakers included representatives of the Karen National Union and the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, as well as Josef Silverstein, Professor emeritus of Rutgers University.

The New York Roundtable is a periodic meeting of organizations and individuals interested in Burma. For more information contact: The Burma Peace Foundation by phone: (212) 338-0048 or fax: (212) 692-9748.

MASSACHUSETTS — The Massachusetts Burma Roundtable of September 11 featured Kevin Heppner of the Karen Human Rights Group. Mr. Heppner discussed the current situation along the Thai-Burma border and in Karen state inside Burma. A Roundtable was held on November 13. A briefing on meetings held with the staff of Senators John Kerry and Ted Kennedy was given.

The Massachusetts Burma Roundtable is an informal group of individuals and organizations working to promote human rights and democracy in Burma. Meetings are held the second Monday of every month. For information contact Simon Billenness of Franklin Research & Development Corporation by phone: (617) 423-6655 or fax: (617) 482-6179.

SAN FRANCISCO — The Bay Area Burma Roundtable is held the third Wednesday of every month. For more information contact Jane Jerome by phone: (415) 424-8643 or e-mail: jjerome@igc.apc.org

SEATTLE — The Burma Interest Group met on October 9 when Larry Dohrs gave a briefing on the nation-wide Corporate Campaign activities discussed at a meeting held in New York in August. Jennifer Leehey also described her recent six month stay in Burma where she studied language and issues of censorship.

The next Roundtable will be held on December 6 and will feature selections of video-taped speeches by Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders.

The Burma Interest Group is a non-partisan forum attended by representatives of NGOs, business, academia and other interested parties that meets monthly to discuss Burma related topics. For more information contact Larry Dohrs by phone: (206) 784-6873 or fax: (206)784-8150.

LONDON — The Burma Briefing of October 5 hosted a delegation of SLORC officials made up of: U Set Maung, spokesman on economic policy; U Ba Thwin, of the Foreign Affairs Ministry and former Ambassador to Japan; U Tin Tin, advisor to the Foreign Affairs Ministry; and investment advisor, U Htun Shein. Dr. Sein Win, Prime Minister of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), U Bo Hla Tint, NCGUB Finance Minister and Harn Yawngwhe of the Associates to Develop Democratic Burma addressed the October 16 Burma Briefing.

The Burma Briefing is a periodic meeting of NGOs working on Burma. For information contact Edmond McGovern by phone: (441-392) 876-849 or fax: (441-392) 876-525

HONG KONG — Information on Burma Roundtables can be obtained by contacting the Asian Human Rights Commission by phone: (852) 2698-6339 or fax: (852) 2698-6367.

BRUSSELS/PARIS — A Burma Roundtable was held in Brussels on October 17. The featured speaker was Valerie Heinonen of the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) a non-profit organization based in New York. Ms. Heinonen provided an update on ICCR’s activities surrounding foreign investment in Burma. On October 12, a meeting was held in Paris with guest speakers Harn Yawngwhe (Associates to Develop Democratic Burma), and Aryeh Neier and Maureen Aung-Thwin (Open Society Institute), who discussed strategies following the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the progress on a Burma resolution to go before the United Nations General Assembly.

The NGO communities in France and Belgium host periodic roundtables in Paris and Brussels. For more information on this European forum contact Lotte Leicht of Human Rights Watch by phone: (32-2) 732-2009 or fax: (32-2) 732-0471.
CALIFORNIA CITY VOTES FOR SANCTIONS ON BURMA

The Santa Monica City Council, in an unanimous vote taken on November 28 moved to prohibit city contracts with companies doing business in Burma. Santa Monica joins the cities of Berkeley California and Madison, Wisconsin in passing this type of selective purchasing legislation.

UNIVERSITY ALUMNI TOUR PLANS FACE PROTEST

The alumni associations of several U.S. universities including Yale, Indiana University, University of Southern California, Northwestern and the University of Michigan have come up against protests to their plans to sponsor "The Road to Mandalay" tours to Burma. Activists, including students and alumni, are stepping up their campaign to discourage the universities from supporting the Burmese government-sponsored "Visit Myanmar Year — 1996." As a result of the protests, the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) has discontinued its promotion of its alumni tour to Burma.

NLD WITHDRAWNS FROM NATIONAL CONVENTION

Burma's leading opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) announced on November 28 its decision not to participate in the government-organized National Convention. According to the NLD, its decision was to protest the refusal of Burma's military leaders to enter into open negotiations on the country's political future. The National Convention has been criticized for not being representative of the people but merely a vehicle for legitimizing the role of the military in governing the country. Tensions in Rangoon mounted with the NLD decision as the uniformed security forces surrounded the homes of senior party members.

BURMESE DISSIDENTS ARRESTED IN BANGKOK

Seventy-one-year-old U Ye Gaung, along with his wife and son, was arrested by Thai police in his apartment outside of Bangkok on November 29. The Burmese writer serves as an editor to the bi-monthly opposition newspaper, The New Era. Fifteen other Burmese activists who had staged a peaceful protest in front of the Burmese Embassy were also arrested. A second round-up of students occurred on November 30 as they prepared to carry on with demonstrations at the Embassy. Many of those that have been arrested are students designated as "persons of concern" by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
REGULATIONS FOR ENTERTAINERS

Lt. Gen. Myo Nyunt, Minister for Religion, determined “correct” dressing for stage performers, in line with the preservation of Myanmar culture. According to the Minister, the regulations are:

For men:
1. They may have their hair long enough to touch the nape of the neck but not to hang down their chest or back.
2. No earings or patches of thanathka [powder] on their cheeks.
3. Clean and neat sports shirts, long- or short-sleeved shirts in colors, printed in floral designs or batik and coats, Myanmar jackets and jerkins are allowed, but NO denim or leather shirts which are shabby, ragged, dirty or frayed.
4. Western formal dress is allowed, but NO jeans of gaudy, floral-design or tight-fitting pants.
5. No gold, silver, iron or bronze bracelets studded with gems or with an irregular surface, or leather stripes, which would be unusual for Myanmar men to wear on their arms or hands, except magnet bracelets specially designed for health purposes.

For women:
1. They may have both long or short hair, neatly done, but are not allowed to have un-oiled, Western-style braided hair. No iron, plastic, gold or silver rings on the ears or the nose. Jewelled chains or necklaces are allowed, but no hanging chains with inappropriate medallions.
2. They may wear sleeveless, long or short sleeved woman’s apparel that cover the body properly and various men-type shirts. They may also wear full or pleated sleeves, but are not allowed to wear low-cut necklines that reveal inner body parts.
3. They may wear htamein [sarongs] in colors or printed in floral patterns. Around their waists, they may wear gold or silver belts but no big buckles. No skirts or gowns slit at the sides, back or front. Htamein must hang no higher than six inches from the ankle.
4. If they want to wear long pants, they may wear them as formal dress but no gaudy or tight-fitting pants. In addition, if there should be five to ten women vocalists at a reception, only one or two may be allowed to wear such pants.
5. Vocalists performing at hotels, motels, inns, restaurants and karaoke clubs are also subject to the above regulations. Also, they are not allowed to sing off-stage, sit on the lap of customers, feed customers with their hands and sip soft drinks, beer or liquor with two straws from a single cup or touch head-to-head with a customer.

The Minister added that nowadays, there are indecent acts at karaoke clubs and even the presence of the flesh trade, arranging to traffick women to other countries. He warned that severe action will be taken against these offenders and the karaoke clubs will be closed. The Divisional Law and Order Restoration Council will also scrutinize the current applications for karaoke clubs to be in line with the above regulations.

For stage concerts, the Minister warned that permits to hold them will be allowed only when the concert organizer signs a pledge to prevent rowdiness and outward disturbances since nowadays many acts which include destroying property and singing on top of chairs are found during these stage shows.

To conclude, the Minister emphasized that the Ministry of Religious Affairs, together with the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Information, are trying to set forth objectives for an ever-flourishing Myanmar culture and bring morality back to the people of the country.

Myanmar: Policies for Sustaining Economic Reform
The World Bank
October 1995

This Country Economic Report examines the impact of changes in Burma's economic policy since SLORC assumed power in 1988; identifying areas in which progress has been made, as well as the gaps that remain in its economic reform program.

Human Rights Yearbook 1994: Burma
NCGUB

Published in 1995, the yearbook documents human rights violations within the army, as well as discrimination against religious minorities and the ethnic peoples. Personal accounts illustrate existing judicial procedures and law according to SLORC.

The Role of NGOs in Burma
Conference Report of World Vision UK
6 June 1995

This collection of papers from a conference held in England includes both statistical data and antedotal information on the humanitarian crisis in Burma and the attempt by NGOs to address the needs of the country.

Tourism T-Shirts
Burmese Relief Center - Japan
266-27 Ozuku-cho
Kashihara, Nara 634
Japan
Tel: (81) 7442-2-8236
Fax: (81) 7442-4-6254
e-mail: brelief@gol.com

T-shirts with "Visit Myanmar Year - 1996" cartoons by student artist, Saw Ngo, can be ordered by contacting the address above. The shirts are available in a variety of colors and four different cartoon designs.

INSIDE WASHINGTON

Senate Votes Down Drug Amendment

In a 50 to 47 vote, an amendment sponsored by Senators John McCain (R-Arizona) and John Kerry (D-Massachusetts) which would permit U.S. assistance to the Burmese government for counter-narcotics activities was defeated on November 1, 1995. The amendment had been attached to the Foreign Operations, Export Financing and Related Programs Appropriations Act but was tabled following a debate on the Senate floor.

Senator McConnell to Reintroduce Sanctions Legislation

Following his decision in September to withdraw his Free Burma Act 1995 amendment to the foreign assistance appropriations bill, Senator Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) has announced plans to reintroduce legislation calling for sanctions against Burma. The Senator had met resistance from fellow Republican, Senator John McCain, on the earlier amendment and agreed to remove it from the bill, promising, however, that he would bring the matter to the Senate again in the future. The new legislation is expected to be introduced in December.
Burma Debate is a publication of The Burma Project of the Open Society Institute.
Mary Pack, Editor

THE OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE (OSI) was established in December of 1993 to promote the development of open societies around the world. Toward this goal, the institute engages in a number of regional and country-specific projects relating to education, media, legal reform and human rights. In addition, OSI undertakes advocacy projects aimed at encouraging debate and disseminating information on a range of issues which are insufficiently explored in the public realm. OSI funds projects that promote the exploration of novel approaches to domestic and international problems.

The Burma Project initiates, supports and administers a wide range of programs and activities. Priority is given to programs that promote the well-being and progress of all the people of Burma regardless of race, ethnic background, age or gender.

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