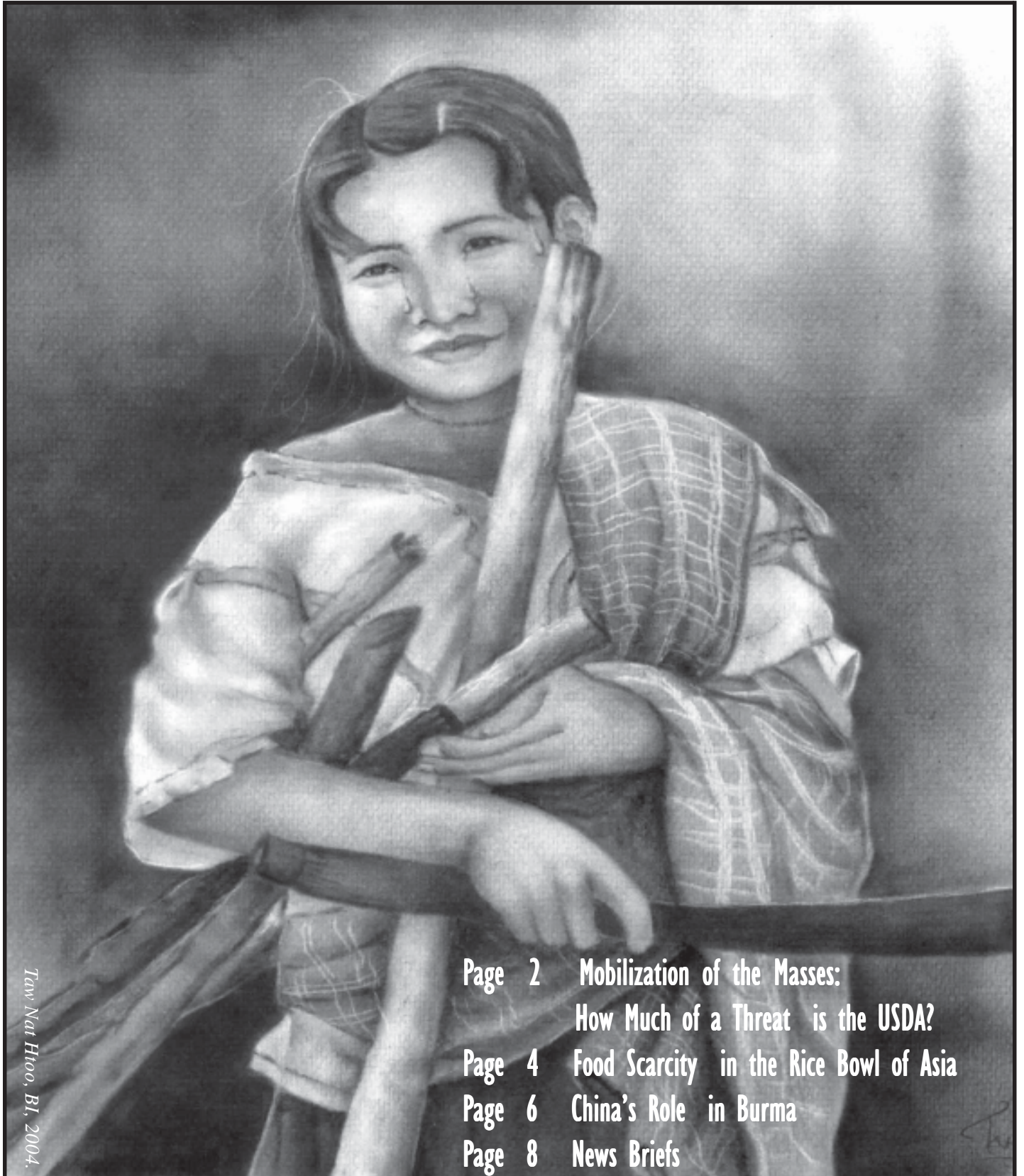




# Burma Issues

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# MOBILIZATION OF THE MASSES: HOW MUCH OF A THREAT IS THE USDA?

BY L. HANCOCK

“**P**eople were all bloody. We were all broken. I was lucky to have escaped...I bumped into their people who were lying in wait for us. They were chasing us like animals. They also beat up people who were on the motorbikes in front...We had to drive our car into the paddy-fields...At about ten, we heard spurts of gun-shots. We saw burning cars...I don't know who was alive and who was dead. All of them were lying flat on the ground with flowing blood.”<sup>1</sup> That's what twenty-six year old witness Ko Wunna Maung of Mandalay testified, describing the chilling violence that occurred on “Black Friday”, May 30, 2003. He was driving alongside the car that held Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, when hundreds of NLD (National League for Democracy) supporters in a convoy of twenty cars and twenty-five motorbikes fell under attack by gunfire, catapults, bamboo stakes, and steel and iron pipes. More than a year has passed since the Depayin Incident occurred, and an influx of reports and eye-witness accounts have been published, yet the exact details of what happened that night remain vague. Amidst all this uncertainty one thing is abundantly clear: the statement made by the governing SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) that 4 people were killed and 50 injured at the hands of the NLD<sup>2</sup> is undoubtedly a farce. The 500 to 1,000 recruited attackers responsible for the imprisonment, rape, murder and injury of the uncountable NLD members and supporters were under the direct orders and orchestration of the SPDC

and the United Solidarity and Development Association, or USDA.

On September 15, 1993, SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) chairman Than Shwe formed the USDA under the Association Law (SLORC Law 6/88), legislating that the USDA was to be “*purely a social welfare organization*,”<sup>3</sup> and not a political party. Although the USDA is devoid of political status, it is puppeteered by the SPDC. As early as February, 1994, evidence was obtained of the USDA's “thuggish” approach to organizing mass-rallies in support of the SPDC. A letter to the BBC, broadcast on February 21, 1994, describes the forced attendance of several thousand people, gathered in a compound in Prome the night before a rally. It explains how, when people were refused permission to leave even to use the toilet, a conflict arose and people tried to escape, climbing up the fences. The guards “*began to beat them with pieces of bamboo and sticks*,” a riot ensued, and “*two men were trampled to death. Twenty people were wounded...two women had their backs broken*”<sup>4</sup>. Despite this, the rally was carried out the following day (February 7) as planned. This was by no means an isolated occurrence. Methods including threats, fines, bribery, and force are freely used to achieve the requisite numbers of “supporters,” to reinforce the impression that the USDA is a well established mass organization.

USDA members receive many economic advantages and job opportunities, which would otherwise be unavailable. With control of a number of bus routes, important documents such as visas, and many businesses, such as The Myan Gone Myint company, the gems market and Myanmar Economic Holdings Co. Ltd., the USDA is infiltrating the economic fibre of society. It is being presented as a key to opportunity, a broadening of a very narrow horizon, a tempting form of bribery many ordinary, struggling people would find difficult to resist.

Now that the National Convention has reconvened, with the official intention of drawing up a new constitution, fears of the USDA and the power that it may wield have heightened, with recent speculation about them being established as an official political party, to contend in elections. Considering that the leaders of the USDA include Head of State Than Shwe and other prominent members of the SPDC, this can be

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seen as a tool for them to create a façade of democracy, without any fear of actually losing their chokehold on power. Its structure and development parallels that of the Indonesian military social organization, Golkar. In 1971 an election was held in Indonesia, led by the New Order party's President Suharto, in which Golkar won the majority of the seats. What was initially meant to be a social welfare group became the winning party, alongside New Order, in the following five undemocratic elections. Both parties dominated Indonesia's political situation for the following 32 years. The USDA has come a long way from being a "purely social welfare organization". In June 1997 it was referred to as an "auxiliary national defense force", by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Maung Aye<sup>5</sup>. Reports have revealed that by the year 2000 the USDA was undergoing military training and members have become reserve army forces, and its role in military intelligence is becoming increasingly prominent. It even received international recognition as a political party when on, October 25, 2000, Lt. Gen. Win Myint was officially welcomed to Beijing, as vice-president of the USDA, rather than as a senior member of the SPDC.

Given the apparent threat, it is important to consider the practicality of the USDA becoming a political party. One must remember that the USDA is merely a by-product of the SPDC, and except for China, it has no international links. Even their own membership, though numerous, is by no means authentic. The percentage of willing members is unknown, but considered to be a minority. The USDA also relies heavily on the material benefits and economic opportunities provided by the SPDC. In light of recent sanctions from the US and EU, following the notorious Depayin Incident, it is very possible that the SPDC will not be able to maintain its levels of control. It would be even more unlikely, in that situation, that the USDA will be able to stand independently as a political party. If the SPDC begins to relinquish power, the USDA will fold.

More worrying, perhaps, are the USDA's attentions to youth and its apparent plans to destroy the NLD. Children are manipulated into becoming members at school in order to pass exams, compromising the quality of their education, as reaching any suitable understanding of the curriculum is undermined. Article 29 of the Conventions on the Rights of the Child, to which Burma has been a signatory since 1991, states that, "The education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, for

*the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, for the natural environment, and the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society.*"<sup>6</sup> However, in Burma many students are forced to attend USDA mass rallies under threat of beatings and fines. Student Unions have been banned, resulting in the arrest and interrogation of many students aged 13-18, who tried to get involved in the democracy movement. The USDA's intentions for the youth are a violation of the Rights of the Child convention: "the patriotic youth, who are members of the USDA, are self-reliant; they have their own initiative... Their strength which is growing year by year, is used for the state... By using their strength, they will oppose anyone who will infringe and disturb the stability of the state... The youth mass will join hands... to totally remove these destructive elements if they try to disturb, damage, or destroy the state."<sup>7</sup>

It is evident that the children of Burma are far from living in a "free society". Instead of being taught freedom and democracy, they are being trained to destroy these values. How will they develop a respect for human rights, when the very concept is alien to them? They are growing up in a society where the NLD and its supporters, the very core and symbol of democracy and freedom in Burma, are being actively crippled. A former USDA member involved in "Black Friday" testified to Radio Free Asia that they were simply ordered to beat NLD members and supporters, that many of the women detained after the attack were raped, that men were hired to dig holes at an abandoned compound where "they brought the bodies, maybe 100 there, including people who were alive with serious injuries... We, the whole town, knew that it was a premeditated attack. But the authorities are trying to cover it up by arresting and killing those who witnessed it."<sup>8</sup> Those who support and participate in the struggle for democracy in Burma are clearly placing their very lives at risk, but under all this oppression and fear of the SPDC/USDA it is evident that their beliefs in democracy and hopes for freedom have not been deterred.



**Endnotes**

- 1 "On the Border": Democratic Voice of Burma, 4th July, 2003
- 2 "Myanmar Cracks Down on Opposition": LA Times, 2nd June, 2003
- 3 NLD statement 105 (7/00), 12th July, 2000.
- 4 "Union Solidarity Development Association": Letters to the BBC: Letter #1 (broadcast on February 21, 1994), An independent report by the Karen Human Rights Group, March 7th, 1994.
- 5 "The USDA Factor" by Min Zin, the Irrawaddy, 6th July, 2003.
- 6 ABFSU: Rights on the Child in Burma; Pre-sessional working group meeting of the 36 sessions of the UNCRC, Thar Nyunt Oo, 5th February, 2004.
- 7 FBIS (Foreign Broadcasting Information Service), 16th May, 1996.
- 8 "Killings, Rapes in Well-planned Attack by Burmese Junta": Radio Free Asia, 5th September, 2003.

# FOOD SCARCITY IN THE RICE BOWL OF ASIA

BY A. CAMPBELL

**A** State that respects the right to food of the people living in its territory should ensure that every individual has permanent access at all times to sufficient and adequate food, and should refrain from taking measures liable to deprive anyone of such access." According to this mandate proposed in Article 2 by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in April 2003, Burma is not only a nation that deprives its people of food, but continues to propagate widespread hunger within its borders.

George Orwell, a public servant to Burma from 1922-1927, predicted that Burma would be the country most likely to prosper after British rule. Instead, in less than 40 years, Burma has plunged from its status as the world's largest rice exporter to one of the world's least developed countries according to the United Nations. It is a nation with vast natural resources and economic potential, but the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) continues to deny many citizens their basic human rights, including the right to food.



IDPs cooking in the jungle, Karen State, May 2002.

In 1997, the Food and Agriculture Organization defined food security as "the access for all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life." Burma is rich in resources, however, most remain undeveloped. Those that are used and expanded such as paddy and other agricultural products, are targeted by the government to supply the military. The result is the coercion of Burma's civilian population, primarily ethnic minorities whose livelihoods are based on agriculture, into supplying the army before their own needs.

According to written submissions to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees by the Asian Legal Resource Centre in light of findings made by the People's Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarisation in Burma in February 2001, the SPDC continually puts "military interests above food security." Research for the People's Tribunal was undertaken by Burma

Issues and the Asian Human Rights Commission between 1997 and 1999 and provides explicit evidence that food scarcity in Burma is a direct result of the militarization the SPDC continues to uphold in the country.

In its first submission to the People's Tribunal in February 1999, Burma Issues and the Asian Human Rights Commission found that in zones of conflict, the SPDC systematically destroys and confiscates food supplies, burning whole villages and slashing, burning or uprooting stores of paddy. Landmines laid both by the SPDC and ethnic insurgent groups restrict access to farmland. In areas partially controlled

by the government, development projects have caused an increase in forced labour and portering, eliminating valuable time farmers could spend tending their fields. Land confiscation and unofficial taxation continue to be widespread in areas where the SPDC has gained significant control. Even in so-called 'white zones', or areas where the SPDC has full control, development and the benefits of food production have largely gone to members

of the military and civil service.

Mark Tamthai of the People's Tribunal wrote a submission to the UN Commission on Human Rights in March 2000 stating one of the most at-risk groups in Burma in regards to food scarcity are the thousands of Internally Displaced People who have been forced out of their homes by counter-insurgency programs and who have fled into the jungles of eastern Burma where food is unreliable.

The problem of food scarcity in Burma has been ongoing for decades. Two government programs in particular initiated widespread hunger in the country. The first of these, the Four Cuts Program, developed by General Ne Win in the mid-1960's, aimed to cut the four main links, food, funds, intelligence and recruits, from insurgent groups. The People's Tribunal states that the Four Cuts incentive was a counter-insurgency program that inevitably affected the

civilian population. In areas of civil war, the SPDC forcibly relocated villages to government-controlled areas, burning homes and crops behind them to impede villagers from returning to cultivate food. It proved an effective way of stopping the flow of resources to insurgent groups and increased military control in ethnic areas.

The second government-run operation that contributed to food scarcity in Burma was the Paddy Procurement Program. The system was introduced nationally in 1974-1975, and allowed for the compulsory purchase of paddy produced across the nation by the SPDC at prices substantially below market value. Rice levies and quotas imposed on villages forced farmers to sell the required rice quota to the military. The compulsory paddy-purchase program was in the words of the Asian Legal Resource Centre in a written submission to the United Nations, *"based upon the land holdings of each farmer and without regard to actual production."* The quota was enforced whether or not farmers' crops yielded the required amount. This sent farmers to the market to buy the rice their own fields couldn't produce, at market value, just to sell it to the military at the state-set price just to meet the required quota. This left many of Burma's farmers with little to feed their families.

While both government operations have officially ended, the Four Cuts Program at the onset of the 21st century and the Paddy Procurement System in April 2003, remnants of both systems are still visible. In October 2003, the Burmese Border Consortium (BBC) in its report "Reclaiming the right to rice: Food security and internal displacement in eastern Burma," said, *"the imposition of production quotas and implicit sales taxes on paddy persists in impoverishing farmers, despite the*

*government's announcement that the paddy procurement program will be cancelled in the coming year."*

Internal documents received by Burma Issues confirm the BBC's statement. Forced relocation, displacement, extortion, unofficial taxes, land confiscation, forced portering and forced labour continue to happen and are visible signs the old policies are still in effect unofficially, effectively robbing Burma's citizens of their right to food. Villagers in relocation sites are forced to pay exorbitant sums of money in agricultural taxes, for development projects and security programs including fees for forced labour and village security. Karen villagers still claim that it is hard to survive and that there is not enough food. With lack of development and a living standard lower than the average, many are forced into poverty.

Food scarcity remains a problem in so-called free-fire zones as well. Development projects spearheaded by the government require forced labour and villagers in relocation sites are prime targets. Every moment spent working on a government development project is one less moment villagers can spend cultivating food for themselves and their families. In addition to this, for the SPDC to acquire land for such large-scale ventures, plantations, paddy fields and other lands are confiscated from farmers without adequate compensation.

Though natural factors and weather conditions will inevitably affect a nation's food supply, all fingers point to the SPDC when discussing the root cause of food scarcity in Burma. Through continued militarization, whether it be displacement, forced relocation, or forced labour, the ruling military junta systematically robs its people of their right to food, effectively starving a whole nation.



## FACTS

~ **On April 28, 2004**, Officer Ten Myi from Division No. 12 of the Military Training Centre based near Pyicha village in the Palaw Township, Mergui district confiscated 46 fruit plantations, 9 cashew nut plantations and one rubber plantation from villagers in the Pyicha relocation site. Villagers are no longer able to return to their land but are forced to pay the government for produce cultivated in their fields.

*Burma Issues Internal Document received from source in Tenasserim Division, June 2004.*

~ **On May 3, 2004**, the Burmese Army, LIB (342), led by Major Yet Myi Sein ploughed through several villagers' plantations in order to construct a road from Pyicha Yebu to Palaw Chaung. Naw Sha Ke said her plantation, 14 betel nut trees and one cashew tree were destroyed in the process. Naw Sha Ke was not the only villager whose plantation suffered because of SPDC development. She is left to survive off what is left on her land.

*Burma Issues Internal Document received from source in Tenasserim Division, May 2004.*

# CHINA'S ROLE IN BURMA

## CAN THE SPDC SURVIVE WITHOUT CHINESE SUPPORT?

BY A. ROBB

In recent years, the Burmese regime has become ever more isolated from the international community. Western governments, especially, have imposed tough economic and political sanctions. Even neighbouring countries, such as normally friendly Thailand and Malaysia, have recently criticised the SPDC over the continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and the exclusion of opposition members from the current National Convention. But there's still one country that won't say anything negative about Burma's undemocratic government, its ongoing human rights abuses, or its serious environmental problems. China, it seems, can be counted on to support the Burmese junta, no matter what.

Burma and China have had a very friendly relationship ever since their similar repressions of similar democratic protests in 1988 and 1989, respectively. Burma even expressed official 'sympathy' over the 'disturbances' at Tiananmen Square to the Chinese *government*. In addition, for many years now, the Chinese government has used the threat of its Security Council veto to quash any United Nations motion condemning Burma for any of its human rights abuses. This has prevented any meaningful action on the part of the United Nations towards changes in Burma.

Chinese interests in Burma range from geopolitical strategising, to border control, to a need for natural resources. As China's worldwide influence grows, it is attempting to consolidate its dominance of Asia, and Burma is a convenient gateway to both Southeast Asia and the Indian Subcontinent. In return for military assistance and over US\$200 million in annual economic aid, and the construction of ports and other facilities in Burma, China gains access to the Bay of Bengal—which would otherwise be dominated by Asian rival India—along with the right to military or economic use of the facilities it helps build. On the other side of Burma, ever since a 2000 agreement between countries in the region, China is sponsoring a huge development project on the Mekong, blasting large portions of the river to make it more navigable for its larger ships, so as to gain access to shipping routes in Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>. Less substantial, but still significant, development is taking place along the Irrawaddy and Salween rivers (that lead to the Bay of Bengal), partly at the behest of Chinese industry. Southeast Asian nations, including

Burma, appear more than willing to accommodate Chinese transportation needs in return for increased business, along these routes, from the economic giant.

More than any other form of aid, however, it is Chinese military support that has made the most difference to the SPDC. It is estimated that a staggering US\$2 billion worth of recent arms packages<sup>2</sup> have flowed from Beijing to Rangoon. This money has allowed the Burmese military to increase its ranks from 180,000 soldiers just a few years ago, to 450,000 today. It is fair to say that this aid has enabled the SPDC to survive based on its military might alone, as there has been little social or economic progress of any kind in Burma, and the government is widely-hated by the population. However, for strategic reasons, the Chinese government desires stability in the region, and appears willing to continue to subsidise the present Burmese leadership, just to discourage any destabilising shift in the regional status quo.

In Burma's northeast, towards the long border between the two countries, China exerts a targeted influence. Effectively patrolling such a border, especially since much of it is rough, wild terrain, would be extremely difficult. So to protect the border from 'undesirable' crossings from Burma—refugees, drugs, and weapons—unofficial Chinese policy seems to involve sending comparatively moneyed immigrants into Burma to take control of the border states of Shan and Kachin, from within. In these areas, Chinese immigrants seem to dominate many aspects of the economy, and especially of Burma's increasingly important underground economy, which consists of illegal logging and mining, illegal trade in drugs, arms, and sex, and the gambling that has become so popular among Thai and Chinese tourists. Although many of these businesses are largely run by and for the Chinese, they function by reliance on cheap Burmese labour. The Chinese government exploits this indirect influence abroad, which allows it to monitor and maintain an economic and political atmosphere that discourages illegal or undesirable border crossings.

China's economic presence in northeastern Burma also serves to ensure a steady flow of the natural resources which the fast-growing Chinese economy is devouring at an amazing rate. Along with Thailand, China consumes the vast

majority of Burma's vast forestry and mineral resources, which most Burmese are too poor to take advantage of themselves.

The SPDC government appears unconcerned by the apparent threat to Burmese sovereignty constituted by the influx of Chinese interests into Burma. Perhaps this is not so surprising, since the SPDC never had much control over Kachin and Shan states to begin with—the ethnic minority groups there maintain many of their own policies. What is more, if the Chinese are to exercise unofficial influence over parts of the region, at least they will allow the SPDC *de jure* control—that is, they will not humiliate it by officially proclaiming their own control. The minority groups might act differently.

Burmese *people* in regions close to the Chinese border, on the other hand, are understandably less comfortable with the increasing foreign presence in their traditional territories. At the most immediate level, recent reports describe rising real estate prices in northeastern cities, to the point where long-time residents are being forced into satellite towns and villages, while the main cities begin to look like Chinese colony-towns<sup>3</sup>. This is due to the influx of relatively wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs, who are able to afford prices far above what the locals can pay. And even while prices go up, Burmese employment tends to suffer in areas with significant Chinese populations: although many Chinese industries rely on Burmese labour, the influx of cheap, Chinese-produced goods has cut deeply into the local manufacturing sector.

The encroachment into Burmese lands of Chinese interests could also have a more intangible, but still serious effect on locals. Especially for members of ethnic minority groups, the Chinese influence represents yet another layer of control over their ancestral land and heritage. The Shan and Kachin people have already spent decades under the control of colonial powers, and then under a hostile, central Burmese government. Now they must suffer another foreign power dictating how and where they will live, and by what means they make their living. The removal of self-control ever further from the grassroots is an unfortunate trend, but one which seems prevalent throughout Burma, as the governing generals become more and more desperate to perpetuate their power, by any means they can find.

None of this is to blame the Chinese people for the difficult situation in which Burmese people find themselves. Indeed, most Chinese are victims of government chauvinism and injustice in the same way as the Burmese are: in

China, like Burma, a relatively small group of people are profiting while huge numbers of rural villagers live in dire poverty and repression. Chinese people, including those living in Burma, are more aware of the problems caused by their government's policies than anyone else. Reports indicate rising Burmese anti-Chinese sentiment, related to the common consensus that Beijing is a major force behind the SPDC's continued survival. This sentiment may unfortunately be transferred from the unelected Chinese government responsible for the problems, to the Chinese people as a whole.

Unfortunately, there are no simple solutions to the problem of exploitative Chinese involvement in Burma. China, as both one of the most important countries in the world, and one of the most repressive, appears invulnerable to international criticism. And no matter how isolated Burma becomes from the international community, Chinese aid alone would appear to be enough to prop up the SPDC indefinitely. China, with its Security Council veto and ongoing financial and military assistance, seems effectively to undermine widespread international criticism of and sanctions against Burma. And the Chinese presence inside Burma, both in the form of development projects that allow China access to Burma's strategic and natural resources, and in the form of business persons and interests on the Burmese side of the border, works against the empowerment of grassroots people.

However, there is another possibility, even if it is a remote one: that the Chinese government could provide an opportunity for freedom and democracy in Burma. As the one country that could support Burma, seemingly more than any other, it could also impose the most effective pressure. Often overlooked is the fact that China was one of the first countries to congratulate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy on its victory in 1990 elections in Burma. Many exiled Burmese dissidents were given asylum in China, and still live there peacefully. Perhaps there is a chance that the Chinese government is not committed to the current Burmese leadership as much as it is to regional stability. And Burma would certainly be more stable with an accountable, widely supported government in Rangoon.



#### Endnotes:

- 1 "The Rape of a River" *Bangkok Post*, January 5, 2003.
- 2 "Burma: Feel-Good US Sanctions Wrongheaded," *YaleGlobal Online*, May 19, 2004
- 3 "Sowing Disorder" *China Rights Forum Journal*, May 2003.

# news briefs

**Burmese Leader Says People's Convention Continues; Problem Virtue Defends Against Natural Disasters:** Speaking to survivors of a May 19 cyclone reported to have killed 220 people in Rakhine state of Burma, Burmese leader Khin Nyunt said Burma is spared more such natural disasters because of its people's strong religious convictions and compassion. Like many natural disasters there, the cyclone was covered up by official media until several days after it hit.

**lems Grow:** Some National Convention delegates reported that not all hand-picked delegates are toeing the SPDC line, though their criticisms have yet to receive a response from the government. The main sticking point is apparently over a proposal for Rangoon to devolve some powers to regional groups. Meanwhile, ceasefire groups remain under tight restrictions: many cannot leave on weekends or even communicate with their organisations.

**EU Cancels ASEM Meeting over Burma:** A planned finance ministers' meeting of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) group has been cancelled over European protests about the attendance of Burma. ASEAN members are pushing for Burma's finance minister to be represented at next month's Brussels talks, but the EU has a visa ban against Burma's regime leaders. EU leaders still hope the ASEM summit planned for October will proceed.

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