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In military ruled Burma, parents are struggling everyday to afford basic education for their children. This is true in urban areas but the situation is even more acute in rural ethnic regions of Burma. As a consequence, many young ethnic people from southern and eastern Burma face the only option of leaving their homeland to seek education in refugee camps located on the Thai-Burma border.

Thelay, 16, an ethnic Karen student living in Tenasserim division, southern Burma told us her family’s story. Thelay’s grandmother has lived all her life in rural Tenasserim where she raised Thelay when her parents died. She is old now and needs to eat healthy, protein rich food, however this is just too expensive. She spends all her money on extortion by Burmese soldiers and above all trying to educate her granddaughter. Thelay pitied her grandma but felt helpless. She wanted to study very much but school fees are just too high for Burma’s rural villagers like them. To overcome this impasse, there is only one option. “If I go to the refugee camp, I will be able to continue my study. If I don’t go, I am sure that I have to quit,” Thelay said.

Thelay studied until grade nine in Ashidgone, in Palaw township of Tenasserim division. She is among many Karen and Tavoyans students whose parents cannot afford high school for their children. This is due partly because of the high number of school fees parents are requested to pay but also as this population is riddle by poverty for five decades of civil war and military rule.

So, in May 2005, Thelay along with 29 students from southern Tavoy town walked through war torn jungle to reach the Thai border. Some of them endured this dangerous trip to attend school in a refugee camp and others to find a work in Thailand.

Naw Eh, 17, student in grade nine, accompanied Thelay to the Thai border. She is now going to school in Htam Hin refugee camp. “In Burma, we had to pay for many things in our village and one day my mother told me that she could not send me to school anymore. So, when I met people traveling to the border, I followed them,” Naw Eh said. Like many other villagers in this rural area, Naw Eh’s parents are farmers earning their living from betel nut and cashew nut plantations.

Naw Eh said that among her friends who recently arrived to the border, many of them went to Thai’s towns to work because they don’t have any relatives to depend on. For these people, access to higher education is now only a doomed dream.

Indeed in recent years, an increasing number of students, like Naw Eh, Thelay and their friends from Tenasserim division, living either in Burma army controlled areas or forced relocation sites in southern Burma, reach refugee camps to study, while many finally end up on Thai fishing boats, in factories or service labour.

According to an official from the Karen insurgent group -the Karen National Union (KNU)- since the beginning of 2005, they have registered more than 400 young people from south
of Tavoy who have crossed to Thailand at the KNU check point. This is only one of many routes that people can use.

The same phenomenon is happening in Karen State in eastern Burma where a rising number of students are fleeing Burmese Army controlled areas and free-fire zones to study in refugee camps. Thera Htoo Thaw, who is in charge of a boarding school in Mae Ra Moe Luang refugee camp in Thailand’s Mae Hong Son province said about 100 students from Nyaung Lin Bin district came to study this year.

And there will be more to come. Villagers from Nyaung Lin Bin district are facing deteriorating living conditions since the last Burma army offensive in the region in November-December 2004. At that time, thousands of rice stocks were destroyed and villagers are now facing food shortage. Schools were constantly interrupted and many students were forced to study on the run. Many just stopped going to school to help their family in the field.

An educational NGO worker from the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR) based in Mae Ra Moe Luang camp said that last year they registered about 900 students from Karen State who came to study in the camp. Sadly, for many Karen students inside Burma, refugee camps scattered along the Thai border symbolize the only hope for education.

According to a recent report released by the All Burma Federation Student Unions (ABFSU), “there are four main reasons for the current poor level of education in ethnic areas, and they are: (a) Relocation; (b) Language; (c) Lack of investment by the government and (d) Forced Labour and Child soldiers.”

Indeed, lack of investment in education is obvious, especially when looking at UNICEF general statistics on Burma. According to the UN agency, Burma’s ruling regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), allocates 29% of central government expenditure to Defence but only 8% on Education (1992-2004). Owing to such a budget policy, Burma’s education system is the least efficient in the whole of Southeast Asia.

There are 39,000 publicly run primary schools throughout Burma, giving an average of one school for every two villages in Burmese dominated regions. But, according to a report published in 2003 by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, in ethnic border areas, there may only be one school for every 25 villages. Just 46% of these are equipped with sanitation, and as little as 17% receive drinking water. In relocation sites where many villagers are forced to move by the military, education is pretty much nonexistent. If a system of education is set up, parents are required to pay the full cost of schooling. However, facing various additional extortions from the army, and frequently subject to forced labour, parents living in relocation sites can rarely support their children’s education at all.

If we listen to SPDC propaganda, public education should be free in Burma. But, in reality, even outside of relocation sites, parents have to contribute not only financially but also physically. In rural communities, most of the schools are built by parents. Teachers are hired by them as well. Villagers are also often forced to pay for the expenses of the building of government schools.

According to Thelay and her friends, they even have to pay for the teacher’s children milk, expenses covering army officers’ visits and a host of other things related to the running of the school. They estimated that one student had to pay at least 104,000 kyat (102.26 US$) to 200,000 kyat to pay for school enrollment fees, examination fees, text books, tuition and other expenses including the school’s sanitation. Naw Eh noted, “because of my schooling, my parents’ debt was over 30,000 kyat.”

Footnotes:
1. The SPDC uses education as a political tool in the “Burmanisation” of ethnic regions of Burma. In all Burma’s schools, it is forbidden to study ethnic languages.
Boarding fees per year = 12,000 to 90,000 Kyat (food not included)
Text book per year = 2,500 to 5,200 Kyat (second hand book), 6000 Kyat (new book)
Note book (for one year, about 6 to 7 dozen). Cost per dozen = 1,800 Kyat
School enroll fees = 32,000 up to 100,000 Kyat.
Pen and Pencil (for one year, around 40 to 50) = 150-200 Kyat
Night class per month = 4,000 Kyat.
Extra class (Saturday) per month = 2,000 Kyat.
Monthly examination fees = 100 Kyat and up
Sport fees per month = 150 Kyat.
Garbage bag fees per month = 150 Kyat
Funeral, teacher’s children milk per month = 100 Kyat
“Pwe”, Burmese tradition show, one ticket = 450 Kyat
SPDC officer visit (per visit) = 500 Kyat
School building = around 5,000 Kyat from each student
School uniform (three pairs) = 9,000 Kyat

There are still many other expenses such as closing school ceremony, food, transfer of the teachers, chairs, table, sanitation, etc. Costs can also vary from area to area.

The daily average wage in Burma is about 800 kyat (0.78 US$).

But students are not only rushing out of Burma because of high school fees; they are also trying to escape a poor quality level of teaching. In ethnic areas, high qualified and experienced teachers are rare. Educational staff are still trained with conservative and traditional teaching methods, and often lack of motivation because of very low salaries (between 4,500 to 10,000 kyat per month). According to a middle school teacher living in Tenasserim division, she is only paid 7000 kyat a month. After paying Burmese authorities for sports fees, calendar fees, and others taxes, only 3000 kyat is left at the end. This amount has to cover expenses for poor quality rice, other basic foods and clothing.

To the detriment of the children’s education, teachers have to find additional ways to survive. Thus, they often organize extra classes at night or during weekends to get additional incomes. The children who cannot afford to attend are often disadvantaged.

Naw Ler Htoo, 18, who also came to the camp with Thelay said she used to participate in extra classes in two subjects: English and mathematics. She attended from Monday to Friday at 7:30 AM to 8:30 AM. One month she had to pay 700 kyat for each subject. “In Burma if you don’t get these extra-classes, you will not pass the exam and the teachers don’t like you. Most of them earn their living by teaching extra-classes,” she said.

She also described the kind of additional hardship students have to face on regular basis.
“Every time when SPDC officials came to visit the area, the school asked for 500 kyat from each student for their feast. When I studied in Palauk, I had to go and work for SPDC Infantry Battalion 280 to clear their helipad and construct buildings. We were also asked to welcome the soldiers with flowers, clear monasteries and plant paddy.”

Naw Wut Ye Mway, 17, a Tavoyan student in grade nine, said that she attended extra class from 6 PM to 9 PM every evening and had to give 4000 kyat per month. For Saturday class she paid 2000 kyat per month. She said, “in normal class, teachers just teach loosely, but during extra class they do their best. In my school, during exam, we cheat by writing on paper, feet and hands. Some teachers also give exam questions to the students they adored.”

She estimated that her education cost around 140,000 kyat per year. “My brothers and sisters said to me that I just spent money for nothing because it cost a lot. My mother has to pay various fees in the village. Every year she got into debt and she cannot pay back even she worked really hard with a little rest.”

“For students in Burma, if their parents are not rich, most of them will get into debt. I decided I will not return to Burma unless the situation has changed.”

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**India and the Junta:**

**Business above Democracy**

**By M. McAteer**

On October 24, 2004, General Than Shwe undertook the first visit to India by a Burmese head of state for 25 years. Topics under discussion included hydroelectric power, cultural exchanges and border security. The carefully choreographed photographs of Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, and the Junta’s most senior officer smiling and shaking hands indicated further the realization of what an official from India’s Ministry of External affairs called “a mutual desire to establish a long term cooperative partnership.”

Human rights groups and activists in India and abroad condemned the meeting. Prior to this, Burmese Prime Minister Lieut. General Soe Win publicly stated “not only will (the junta) never talk to the National League for Democracy (NLD), but also will never hand power over to the NLD.” Considering this comment it seems difficult to fathom how the world’s largest democracy can continue to promote the validity of such a barbaric dictatorship.

However, this situation had not always been the official line. In 1988, under the premiership of Rajiv Gandhi, India morally supported the pro democracy forces. Requests from the Indian government for Aung San Suu Kyi’s release also irked the Burmese government at this time. The 1990’s though seemed to bring a volte face in Indian attitudes to their pariah neighbour. In reality this is a minor exaggeration, cooperation had existed in one form or another despite soured diplomatic relations. Indeed, a border agreement was signed in 1967 and maritime boundaries between Burma and India were defined by a maritime delimitation act in 1986.

Close ties have existed for centuries between the two, the spread of Buddhism from India in the 3rd century AD, established an early bond. A shared experience of British Colonial rule meant links were still present in the 20th century. India’s Foreign Minister at the opening of the Indo-Myanmar friendship bridge in 2001, spoke of this new connection as a continuation of social and spiritual linkages. Indeed this brand new 160km road and bridge linking Moreh in Manipur State, Northeastern India with Kalewa on the Chindwin River in Burma, was perhaps a striking symbol just how close the two had become.

To continue p6
Also crucial to understanding the increased contact between India and Burma is the ideal of “Constructive Engagement”. This gradualist approach involves talking and trading with Burma whilst simultaneously trying to persuade them to democratize and end human rights abuses. The policy was introduced by the Thai government in 1991. Its regionalization culminated in 1997 with Burma being granted full membership of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In 1992 India commenced its “Look East Policy”, which was aimed at seeking new economic partners and markets abroad. South East Asia with its “Tiger” economies became a major target. It was at this time that India’s conduct toward Burma really took on new significance. To put it mildly, Burma was now vital in furthering India’s commercial interests in the region and vice versa. The 1643 km shared land border in India’s Northeast provided the opportunity of more road links from the subcontinent. Chief Minister of Manipur State Okram Singh noted “the North East could well turn out to be a gateway to South East Asia.” Since that time trade and commerce between Burma and India has developed considerably. Between 1991-92 and 2001-02 bilateral trade between the two countries grew from $74.8m to some $428m. India is now Burma’s biggest exporter, absorbing a quarter of its exports, primarily iron and steel products and pharmaceuticals.

However recently there has been some disquiet in particular from the Indian side about the volume of trade between India and Burma. Mangi Singh, Trade and Commerce Minister for Manipur State noted India’s export growth lies at just 7% against the import growth of 32% from Burma. He has called for the central governments of India and Burma to take a more pro active role in boosting the trade between the two, to provide more security for traders from insurgents in the area and to halt illegal trade in such items as medicine, cosmetics and garments. It seems the region has not become the success story the Indians would have wished. Security as well as trade was supposed to improve, yet militant activity still persists. The benefits in this instance appear to be one sided in Burma’s favour. They now have a huge customer for their exports and have certainly gained in the public relations stakes from dealing with the world’s largest democracy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exports to India</th>
<th>Imports from India</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>29.98</td>
<td>0.80</td>
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<td>1991-92</td>
<td>51.37</td>
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<td>164.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>261.99</td>
<td>83.16</td>
<td>345.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>345.74</td>
<td>82.26</td>
<td>428.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table on Burma-India Trade (in US$ million)
have been no apparent moves toward democracy, despite what some argued after Burma relinquished the Chairmanship of ASEAN. All signs suggest they are becoming even more centralized and intransigent. All outside influence is being silenced, as shown by the fact that UN and NGO operations are being curtailed by government activities. The International Labour Organisation, a leading campaigner against forced labour are said to be on the brink of expulsion from the country. All dissent is being silenced and the grip on power by the few is tightening. This illustrates the failure of “Constructive Engagement”. Essentially it gives tacit consent to the governments’ activities and provides easy answers to complex questions about the justification of milking economic benefits from a resource rich but fundamentally amoral regime. India, a proponent of the policy has to be considered a big culprit of this.

As with so many other issues in the region, the “China factor” should not be discounted. China strategically embraced Burma in the late 1980’s, providing it with sizeable military supplies. India at this time still advocated a pro democracy stance and this allowed the Chinese to establish a strategic foothold in Burma. Since then Beijing has contributed heavily to modernizing its neighbour’s infrastructure, including the building of three roads from different districts of Yunnan province to Burmese towns and is planning to build a 1350km railway from Kunming going through Laos and Burma to Bangkok.

China has also been a very aggressive player in infiltrating South East Asian markets, this situation was propelled by the ASEAN-China Free trade agreement in 2000. India since moving away from its previous stance of non engagement is now attempting to challenge its major regional rival, by developing major infrastructure and trade deals of its own with Burma, and so in turn is looking to expand its interests in South East Asia. Growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean should not be discounted when considering the development of Indo-Burma relations. As the Chinese seek strategic outposts on Burmese Islands, good relations with the owners of these islands are obviously in India’s interests.

Whatever the justifications behind India’s collusion with the Burmese government, whether the argument should be about improving domestic security, addressing an energy crisis, or counteracting Chinese dominance, they are inherently all to do with national ambitions. The benefits they are seeking are there for everyone to see. India is becoming a vast global player, and it is looking to cement and improve this position. However with this power, as the well worn cliché goes, comes responsibility. Being the “world’s largest democracy” what India should ultimately stand for is an adherence to the principles of democracy. The friendly, “smile for the cameras” relationship between India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and General Than Shwe stresses something to the contrary. Essentially that principles such as human rights, and democratic processes mean very little to India, particularly if there is economic gain to be made.

Endnotes:

1. Figures from http://www.indiainbusiness.nic.in/commercial-relation/myanmar.htm
2. Perspective on Myanmar-India relations, Dr Udai Bhanu Singh, Dialogue vol 5 no.3, March 2004
4. Why Intervention in Burma is an Urgent Need, Burma Today News, July 28, 2005
5. Proposed Pipeline Causes Concern, The Irrawaddy, July 12, 2005
6. Ibid
7. Generals strengthen their hold on power, Bangkok Post, July 22, 2005

Indian PM Mannmohan Singh and General Than Shwe, India, October 2004. Photo: The Telegraph, Calcutta
Four hundred prisoners released by Rangoon: Burma’s military government said last month it had released approximately 400 prisoners across the country but would not identify the freed inmates, many of whom were believed to be political detainees. There has been no official confirmation as to who the inmates were or whether prominent political prisoners were among them.

Khin Nyunt gets a 44-year prison sentence: Former Burmese Prime Minister Khin Nyunt received a 44-year suspended sentence after being convicted on eight charges including bribery and corruption, legal sources said. It is believed Khin Nyunt would be kept under house arrest, where he has been detained since his ouster in a purge last October, a source close to the ex-premier’s family said. The family source also confirmed the conviction of Khin Nyunt, but declined to provide details. A tribunal at Insein also handed down prison sentences of 68 years and 51 years respectively to two of Khin Nyunt’s sons, Zaw Naing Oo and Ye Naing Win.

Salween Dam to effect Mon villagers: Mon farmers who live on small islands along the coast will be affected by the construction of the Salween dam, said a Mon environmental activist team after doing research on the outcome of the construction. These islands where there are over 2000 households are in Moulmein and Paung townships, Mon State. According to the team, the water level will drop if the dam is constructed, the irrigation system managed by the local people will be disrupted and the farmers will face difficulty in their plantations. The farmers will receive no compensation for the loss of traditional resources.

Junta keeps an eye on foreign activities: Military units in northern Shan State have been ordered to keep an eye on foreigners engaged in humanitarian activities, according to reports from Lashio, the state’s northern capital. The order directed all those concerned to keep track of all foreign workers whether they are from the UN or NGOs. The reason for the issuance of the order was said to be the prompt reporting of several events by foreign-based radio stations, such as the arrests of four members of the ceasefire group Shan State Army ‘North’ on 5 July on the same evening.

Burma decides to give up ASEAN Chair: After months of speculation and increasing pressure from the international community, Burma relinquished the rotating ASEAN Chair at the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Vientiane. The reason given by the junta was that “the government of Burma wants to focus its attention on the ongoing national reconciliation and democratization process.” The Philippines, the next in line in the rotating system, will now assume the chairmanship of ASEAN at the end of 2006.