TYRANNY OF THE ABSURD:
ASSESSING THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE PYINMANA MOVE
BY NANDA KYAW THU

At exactly 6:37 am on Sunday November 6th, 2005 a convoy of military trucks left Rangoon carrying civil servants to the country’s newly assigned capital in a bucolic and malaria prone valley in Mandalay Division. Many of those relocating had only learned about the move three days prior. On Monday the 7th, Burma’s information minister, Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan, officially announced that the country’s capital would be a newly established city in Pyinmana District. The minister further explained that, “The reason we are moving is because Pyinmana, which is in the centre of Myanmar, is geographically and strategically located for the development of the country”¹. Mass transfers continued thereafter with the stated intention of effectively relocating and opening all government ministries by January 1st, 2006.

Construction at Pyinmana began several months before November’s relocation and contractors working on the project have estimated that the kyat equivalent of millions of US dollars, an exorbitant amount in Burma, are being spent on infrastructure development. Over thirty contracting companies have been employed to construct mansions for senior generals, government offices, national headquarters for ceasefire groups and the state-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association, bunkers, tunnels, a large military hospital, apartments, airstrips, a golf course, two luxury hotels and two large supermarkets². Analysts claim that expenses are being born by a mixture of foreign aid and domestic drug money and offset by the use of forced labour.

Furthermore, land needed for the capital has been forcibly confiscated from thousands of villagers living in the area³.

Despite the pace of construction efforts, the rush to relocate the capital at the start of November meant that much of the complex remained incomplete. Civil servants forcibly relocated to Pyinmana were deposited in a large hall and provided with food for only two days. After this they were told they would have to “fend for themselves”, although the closest food stores were 30 kilometres away⁴. Communication infrastructure was also incomplete and one government department had only three telephone lines for the entire ministry⁵. Those able to contact family members back in Rangoon mostly asked them to send food. One of those relocated said, “There is nothing to eat, drink and nothing to buy. Just nothing”⁶.

In response to the isolation and underdevelopment of Pyinmana, some workers have attempted to resist transfer. Even Than Shwe has decided to remain behind in Rangoon as the capital moves north⁷. However, this is only a possibility with high-level military con-
nections. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has also issued a statement barring civil servants from resigning. Those caught abandoning their posts are to be charged under Emergency Provision Act - 5J for treason and insubordination. Alternatively, some civil servants have been promised a six-fold increase in salary following their relocation.

The absurdity of hurriedly moving the capital at such an expense to an isolated outpost where basic necessities cannot even be provided for government employees has led observers in the international and exiled media to provide elaborate hypotheses as to why this relocation was even contemplated. Most theories are connected with the military’s desire to retain absolute power in the face of an uncertain future. Following this line of thought are suggestions that the junta wishes greater security from a sea-born invasion (presumably by the United States); a more advantageous position vis-a-vis the various ethnic groups; to alienate the pro-democracy opposition by restricting them from the locus of political decision-making; and to isolate themselves from any popular uprising.

Arguments less tied to the junta’s authoritarian predilection have highlighted Pyinmana’s strategic location in relation to the proposed trans-Asian super highways which are intended to connect India, China and Thailand. Others have suggested that the dry zone of upper Burma is the cultural and historical heartland of the country. It is only natural, so the argument goes, that the capital should return here and provide a final cure to the country’s colonial hangover.

Intimately connected to the question of “Why move?” is “Why now?” Hypotheses about timing have been equally as varied. Much ink has been spent on discussions about the proclamations of astrologists close to Than Shwe. To support this view, observers have pointed to the SPDC’s requirement that the initial convoy depart at exactly 6:37 am on November 6th and that 11 ministries were opened in Pyinmana at 11:00 am on the 11th day of the 11th month. Alternatively, some observers have indicated that the move is meant to coincide with developments in the National Convention.

Another theory suggests that developments within the international community, more specifically within the United Nations Security Council, have potentially undermined the SPDC’s confidence in maintaining the status quo. The publication of Threat to Peace, commissioned by Nobel Laureates Desmond Tutu and Vaclav Havel and calling for Security Council action on Burma, and the December 16th 2005 Security Council briefing on Burma support such a theory. The timing of the Pyinmana move may therefore have been prompted by a new wariness of international action against the junta.

The causes and timing of the Pyinmana move can likely be attributed to a combination of these factors. Yet such explanations are to some extent superfluous to humanitarian and political concerns. It is rather the consequences of this move that deserve primary consideration. A more relevant approach would therefore seek to discern the impact of the capital relocation on the pro-democracy opposition and the position of the ethnic nationalities; the junta’s relationships with ASEAN; and the international community’s motivation to push for greater political liberalisation. These issues are more germane to the struggle for peace and democracy in Burma than postulates about the SPDC’s motivations.

The consequences of the Pyinmana move on Burma’s pro-democracy opposition will be negligible in the current context given that the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other political opposition groups have been more or less neutralised since the 2003 Depayin massacre. Regardless, the NLD may be restricted from opening a party office in the new capital and therefore be isolated from the new structures of government envisaged in the SPDC’s “Road Map.” This view is seemingly confirmed by reports that Military Intelligence units transferred to Pyinmana summoned local NLD members from Pyinmana District on November 6th.
24th in order to interrogate them about current and planned activities. The NLD has denied the relocation will further constrain attempts at dialogue with the military. They also have no intention of moving their headquarters out of Rangoon. The junta has isolated political opposition and popular protest with some effectiveness at the National Convention. Citizens and some political parties have been obstructed from travelling to the remote site where the forum is being held. If the Convention is any indicator, the Pyinmana move may indeed become an obstacle to Burma’s pro-democracy movement. While opposition parties may be equally oppressed regardless of the capital’s location, a popular uprising would be more distinctly constrained through isolation.

Some analysts have argued that the move demonstrates the junta’s desire to increase control over areas of insurrection. Although, even if the relocation coincides with an increase in military offensives, there is little reason to suspect that the new capital will allow for a greater deployment of troops. Nor, for that matter, will it alleviate the challenges of accessing the rugged terrain where the remaining insurgencies are based. There is also no reason to conclude that incidents of human rights violations will necessarily increase or decrease as a consequence of the move. Due to the present isolation of the capital and restricted communication however, there may be an increase in regional military autonomy. This could lead to increasingly independent military policy across regions, at least until the central authority can effectively re-establish control from Pyinmana.

More remarkable are changes in attitude towards the SPDC from within ASEAN, given that the organisation has traditionally followed their stated policy of non-interference. During ASEAN’s 11th summit from December 12th to 13th 2005 Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines all expressed disappointment about Burma’s political situation. To what extent the Pyinmana move contributed to these shifting sentiments is unclear, although statements by ASEAN leaders indicate that the move has further frustrated their relationship with the SPDC. Malaysian officials called the relocation “puzzling” and the country’s foreign minister, Syed Hamid, said Burma was both a burden and an embarrassment for ASEAN. Thailand’s foreign minister similarly stated, “It came as a big surprise and that worried many Asean members.” Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, normally a staunch supporter of the junta, admitted in December that he felt “uncomfortable” about the SPDC’s elusive behaviour. Such concern prompted ASEAN to arrange for a delegation to visit Burma in early January to investigate the state of the country’s transition to democracy. Shortly before ASEAN officials were set to embark on their mission, Burmese officials said they were unable to accommodate the delegation at the present time, as relocating the capital was consuming all their time and energy. It would presumptuous to cite Pyinmana as the sole cause of ASEAN’s recent frustration with Burma and their shift to a more assertive policy, but it has most likely served to re-enforce concerns within the regional grouping about the junta’s unpredictability and volatility.

The larger international community will likely have less tolerance than ASEAN. Diplomats operating in Rangoon had no idea how to contact the SPDC when the junta departed the former capital. The SPDC also doesn’t seem concerned about relocating diplomatic missions any time soon. Burmese authorities said diplomats could arrange for the construction of embassies in Pyinmana in two years time. As such, diplomats in Rangoon were left severed from the junta. “If it’s urgent,” said one official in reference to foreign diplomats, “they can send a fax.” This alienation has also been felt by international humanitarian agencies based in Rangoon. The UN likewise expressed its concern that the transfer of government ministries to Pyinmana would hinder their capacity to function effectively. The exasperation felt by diplomats, UN agencies, and aid organisations as a consequence of the Pyinmana move will surely contribute to the growing international consensus about the instability of Burma’s military regime and the need for a considered response. The December briefing on Burma’s humanitarian and political situation to the UN Security Council reinforces this perspective.

When taken as a whole, the consequences of the Pyinmana move highlight the extent to which the SPDC has disregarded regional and international opinion in favour of absurdly impulsive political and military initiatives. Although
the site of the new capital may present obstacles to the pro-democracy movement and the ethnic nationalities, it will likely strengthen the international consensus about the incapacity of the present regime to function as a stable member of contemporary international society. The more the Burmese junta disregards the concerns of its neighbours and the wider international community, the greater the likelihood that it will be called to task within the UN Security Council.

Endnotes
2 “UN takes big step to address Myanmar (Burma) issues”, Thai Press Reports, December 7, 2005.
4 “Myanmar presses on with move to half-finished government compound”, Agence France Presse, November 7, 2005.
5 “Moving Target”, The Irrawaddy, November 9, 2005.
6 “SPDC’s leaders take to the hills”, Asia Times, November 23, 2005.
15 “A capital move; Myanmar”, The Economist, November 11.

Historical Note:
In 1942, while Japan ruled Burma during their WWII expansion into Southeast Asia, independence here General Aung San, father of Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, chose Pyinmana as the location for the headquarters of the Burma Independence Army. The site was to be used to fend off both Japanese and British advances and consolidate the country’s independence. Pyinmana was chosen for its protective mountain ranges and central location.

TRUE EXPERIENCES:

PEOPLE SPEAK OUT

BY NAW SUNDAY HTOO

This article is about people from forced relocation sites and internally displaced persons (IDP) areas in Tenasserim Division, Karen State, Burma. The vast majority people under the control of the Burmese military dictatorship, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), are struggling to survive. These are stories from the people about their experiences.
People who live in IDP areas are called the enemy by the State Peace and Development Council, but they are not. They are the people of Burma, who have been forced to leave their homes. Even though people in the IDP areas have to move very often, they are free to support their daily lives.

Those from IDP areas and forced relocation sites often journey to each other to keep up-to-date with the situation, troop movements and to share their experiences. The leader of Ka Pla village, which is located in a forced relocation site, Saw Ta Paw Kwa, visited an IDP area and described what the Burmese soldiers did to him. “In November after the Burmese army fought with their enemy (Karen National Union), they came back to our village and punished us for not informing them about the KNU. They called the villagers and made them stand in the sunshine for three hours. It was too hot for them. Even though we were the leaders in the village, they called for us. They forced us also to stand in the sun. One soldier hit me with his gun, then the soldiers bound me, slapped and punched my head and then they stabbed my thigh. They asked us why we did not inform them about the KNU. They hit five people including two girls. For the future, I would like to live as brothers and sisters in peace. They always torture our village.”

While Saw Ta Paw Kwa remains with his family in the village, events like this and other human right abuses lead villagers to flee their homes and become internally displaced persons. They search for places to live that they think the Burmese army will not find. They grow rice paddies to feed their families. Fears that they the Burmese troops will find them are every present, so they monitor news from villagers and rebel groups about the movements of the army. If the army is getting close to where the IDPs are hiding, they flee.

Naw K’Tray, crying, describes how she became a widowed. She said, “One Sunday afternoon I was waiting for my husband, Saw See Praw, and our children by the stream. My husband went to listen to news about the Burmese army situation. I heard gun shots fired, then, he and the children ran back to me and he shouted to the children, “don’t make a sound when you run”. My children came back to me and we heard the gun again. I did not hear his voice anymore. They shot my husband. I and my children ran to another mountain. We did not have food and slept on the rock without anything. Now when I enter my paddy field, I can’t control my tears and I am full with thoughts.”

The Light Infantry Battalion 104 led by Aung Zaw Min killed Saw See Praw and tried to kill his family. The same battalion of soldiers burnt Saw Kwa’s house down. Saw Kwa and his family had fled to a hiding place, which had a small amount of food, before the soldiers destroyed their house and their belongings. Saw Kwa, who has lived as an IDP in the jungle since 1997, said “In the past, the Burmese army never come to this area so I grew rice paddy and lived with my family. But, on November 20th, 2005, Burmese soldiers arrived here and killed one villager (Saw See Praw) and burnt down my house including three baskets of sticky rice, and everything in the house. They took my guitar and cassette. I think I would not build my house again. I will only build a small hut beside my paddy field.”

The Burmese military government profess that the army does not target IDPs, but this is not true. If soldiers in the Burmese Army find people hiding they are suppose to call the people and bring them safely to the village. But most of the time this does not happen. Saw Thah See, a 23-year old Karen man, retells the story when the Burmese Army came to the IDP area where he was living.
with his family. “When I went to toilet, I heard the gun shots. I saw the Burmese army shoot my house in the paddy field. My family was in the house. My father Saw Thaw See, 45 years old, and my 11-year-old sister Naw Mee Kwee were killed. My mother was shot in her legs. The soldiers forced nine men and 12 women, including my injured mother, to go to the village. When they reached the village the soldiers released all the women, but along the way they killed the nine men.”

The KNU area leader said that in addition to killing 11 people, including Saw That See’s father and sister, on July 10th last year, the soldiers, led by Captain Win Naing, also “destroyed 200 paddy baskets and they took all the money from every house”. They do not know how much money was taken from each house, but one house lost 100,000 kyat.

The KNU leader of this area said the situation for the IDPs is difficult because the Burmese Army can arrest or kill them. He said if we compare living in the jungle as an IDP with living in a forced relocation site, we have more freedom when we live in the jungle. In a forced relocation site, the people can go out only a few hours, and if they go out too much and take a long time, the soldiers accuse the people of contacting the KNU and hit them.

INSIDE THE FORCED RELOCATION SITE

Life inside forced relocation sites is also hard. The villagers in forced relocation sites are under the complete control of the Burmese Army. Villagers have to live in places the army forces them to and do the work they are ordered to. The soldiers torture, kill and rape the people. The villagers cannot reply or protest against the treatment. They can only say yes and accept it.

Last year three villagers in a forced relocation site were killed by the Burmese soldiers. Naw Baw Baw (names have been changed) said that in October the Burmese troops went to the frontline to fight the KNU. Some of the soldiers got injured. They could not find the KNU so, when they came back to the village, they shot one missile and called a meeting for every man from the village. All the women and children had to stay in their own houses. The soldiers interrogated the men, demanding to know why they did not inform them about the KNU’s news. Naw Baw Baw’s 17-year-old son was not at the meeting, he was at the river taking a bath with his friends.

Another woman from the same village, Naw Wah, continues the story saying “When they had a meeting, we had to stay in the house. My nephew and his friends didn’t know the Burmese army was having a meeting so they went to take a bath in the river. My nephew has been living with me since he was a child and his name is Saw Maw Dee. He was 17 years old. He went to take a bath with his best friends, and since that day they have not been seen. We could not hear their cries, but other villagers did. We did not hear any gun shots. In my thoughts, they were tortured before they were killed. The soldiers told us to stay in our houses. We could not go out and get paddy from the field, take care of our animals, or go to take a bath. We had to stay in our own house.”

Villagers under Burmese army control have to pay arbitrary taxes and work whenever the troops order them. This is true for every village. In addition the villagers have to ask permission to go to their fields. Some villagers do not get permission and they cannot go out and harvest their paddy so they can not grow enough food to feed their families. To buy food, they borrow money from their neighbours and then they get into debt.

These are the true experiences of the people. We cannot choose the place we are born and so we cannot decide what hardships in life we will face. When you have no country, your belongings (land, house and money) go missing and your mind, body and soul is always changing because you are never sure that you are a human being. Even if you are a human, your life is the same as an animal.

*Interviews for this article were gathered by BI Video project staff.

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ASEAN envoy wants to see Aung San Suu Kyi: Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said he would insist on seeing detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, when he visits Burma as a representative of ASEAN.

Burma said it was too busy moving its capital to receive the ASEAN envoy, who had been expecting to visit Rangoon this month to check on progress towards democracy.

Syed Hamid said he hoped the visit would go ahead in late February or early March, and sidestepped suggestions that his insistence on seeing Aung San Suu Kyi had triggered the delay.

“They didn’t give that as a reason but I told them, if I go to Myanmar I have to see all the political parties in Myanmar,” he said. “Otherwise I think we would lose our credibility.

National Convention to close until May: Burma’s ongoing National Convention, charged with drafting a new constitution, will close in late January until May, amid an international cry over the country’s slow push to democracy, according to delegates.

Lieutenant General Thein Sein, who heads the convention, told state media that a plenary session would be held next week.

That is normally a sign that the delegates are preparing to recess from the convention. Some one thousand people chosen by the junta are discussing a new basic law in a process condemned internationally for failing to include the pro-democracy opposition.

Burma’s ethnic minorities are the 5th most at risk: New York-based Minority Rights Group International (MRG) says ethnic minorities in Burma are among the five groups most at risk from government persecution in the world today.

In a report released on January 20, MRG says Iraqi minorities are the most vulnerable group. Burma’s ethnic minorities are considered the fifth most at risk group.

SSA-South commander and troops surrender: Following a 15-day siege by the Burmese Army, more than 40 Shan State Army-South soldiers led by commander Khun Kyaw surrendered.

The SSA-South forces led by Khun Kyaw, aka Than Jaung, were arrested and surrendered their arms, ammunition and communication equipment. The soldiers were transported to Lashio in a convoy of military trucks.

Khun Kyaw is a former member and war commissioner of the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front in the Kachin Independence Army-controlled area in Northern Burma.

But after the KIA reached a cease-fire agreement with the military, his forces had to leave the KIA-controlled area in 1997, leading to his resignation and a merger with SSA-South forces.