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Photo: Saw Kweh Say, 2007
To the outsider, the view of Karen State as a chaotic, repressed community probably leads to the perception that grassroots administration and organisation is dead in the water. One might assume that violence and desperation have torn apart the structures of traditional leadership. However, a closer look at the situation shows that this is far from the truth. The good news is that leadership structures remain in place and there are efforts to enhance this leadership with a solid dose of people power.

Continuing the administration at grassroots level goes hand in hand with ongoing efforts to organise villages into strong, self-determining communities. This way, they are better equipped to rise above the State Peace and Development Council’s (SPDC), relentless pursuit of absolute submission. Efforts by the international community to bring about change in Burma’s regime are futile without first succeeding to create a healthy movement of free-thinking, politically motivated people at a grassroots level.

Imagine if a positive change did happen at the top end of the Burmese administration; Great stuff, but how could a new political system thrive without the enthusiastic participation of an organised population?

This is where the village comes into play. In his report, Mapping and Empowerment, researcher Noah Vines emphasises the potential of villages to foster political change; “Not only are villages the site of everyday activity, but they are also traditional centers of authority where power relations are observable.”

Village life has stood the test of time in Burma. With this in mind, it seems to be a question of how best to capitalise on the potential of village leadership.

So, how are villages administrated?

Within Karen State the administrative situation depends entirely on which of three “zones” a village is in. The three zones are defined by villagers, opposition groups and the SPDC as;

- The black zone – controlled by armed opposition groups, in Karen State this means the Karen National Union (KNU)
- The brown zone – neither the KNU nor the SPDC has been able to take full control from the other, and both are active in these areas
- The white zone – controlled by the SPDC

Villages, typically containing ten to thirty households, usually have an administration of about seven people, including the head villager, a treasurer, a secretary and a head of security.

In the brown zone, where both the KNU and the SPDC are active, things get complicated. These villages are torn between two conflicting authorities and there are two separate administrations; one answering to the SPDC and the other to the KNU. In this situation one village has two separate head villagers, one for the SPDC and one for the KNU.

For each administration, villagers hold a meeting to decide who will be the head villager. However, it is rarely a question of voting - the villagers discuss the matter and come to a decision together. The role of head villager is not an easy one, and most villagers do not want the position. However, they have little choice. Once the villagers make a decision, the nominee is expected to accept. The head villager takes the role for one year, after which the village may decide he should continue for a second year.

The head villager aligned with the SPDC has the unenviable task of reporting to the SPDC every day. He must give them information about any contact the village has had with the Karen
National Liberation Army, the armed wing of the KNU. This puts him in a tough situation; doing this might alienate him from his community, but lying to the SPDC (and getting caught) will result in torture. On top of this, the SPDC’s head villager is expected to select villagers for the SPDC’s notorious “forced labour” program. The SPDC head villager is also responsible for collecting taxes and other duties.

The KNU head villager also has to liaise with the KNU, but not every day. He is responsible for the collection of KNU taxes (villagers in the brown zone pay taxes to a number of different authorities). For the most part, the SPDC doesn’t know about the KNU head villager but if they do find out, the KNU head villager has no choice but to flee for his safety.

Add to this the fact that both head villagers have to sacrifice time from their work (mainly agriculture), which directly affects their livelihoods and impacts on their ability to feed their family, and you can understand why many are reluctant to take either post.

It is confusing how two separate administrations manage one small village. While the two village heads do not work together, they do sometimes share ideas.

In the black zone, controlled by the KNU, things are simpler since there is only one administration system (aligned with the KNU) also decided by a village meeting. Head villagers and their administration systems are responsible for general administrative tasks, including tax collection and liaising with the KNU. Head villagers in the black zone are also expected to select villagers to assist with “labour” for the KNU and KNLA, for example transporting supplies for the KNLA military activities or relief work. Although this is not referred to as “forced labour”, villagers are understandably reluctant to leave their work and livelihood to assist with unpaid KNU labour. This can lead to frustrations between the administration systems and villagers and further underlines the difficulty faced by head villagers.

A village’s administration can also make rulings about minor disputes within the village.

In the SPDC-controlled white zone, villages only have an SPDC administration. Since November 1997 the Burmese junta has carried out intensive military offensives targeting civilians in Karen State pretty much on an annual basis. Consequently, village administrations have been put to the test. Villages have become more isolated due to the conflict surrounding them. Administrative structures are under increasing pressure to hold together and leadership has become an even tougher role to perform. However, the fact that village administrations are able to hold up under such circumstances demonstrates the strength and potential of grassroots organisation.

It is this potential that many community-based organisations (CBOs) working cross-border into Karen State on good governance projects and local programs to develop and strength administration systems hope to tap into. One objective of these projects is to communicate with villagers and develop a culture of critical thinking and strategic planning. CBO workers says that one of the major hurdles to encouraging change in Burma, particularly in Karen State, is that grassroots people have been largely battered into submission by an unrelenting regime (the SPDC). After decades of oppression and being forced not to express dissent, many villagers have lost the willingness not only to express their views, but even to think about them.

This mindset is often referred to as “the culture of oppression”. Reversing the culture of oppression, at the village level, is one of the biggest factors in bringing about change in Burma. While most of the international community is concerned with pressuring the top end of Burmese society, very few are concerned with mobilising village ideology.

Most people seem to think, “the military government are the bad guys, so let’s start by fixing them.”

In his report, Noah Vines laments the international community’s focus on Burma as a problem to be solved from the “top-down”. He concludes that solving Burma’s problems has more to do with a “bottom-up” approach.

“Burma remains so heavily repressed internally...that promoting change through legal channels or building organizational capabili-
ties within the country are virtually futile, unless they begin from the most basic foundations: the grassroots majority.”

In other words, start by mobilising the grassroots of a society (while still keeping pressure on the ruling regime). If you enhance a desire for empowerment at village level, you plant a seed that slowly grows into social and political change at the top. Community based organisations (CBOs) run training programs inside Burma, aiming to help communities “develop the broader skills, courage, wisdom and confidence necessary to participate fully and effectively in their broader community and the broader society.”

However, the culture of oppression is caused by many factors, not only the SPDC. People are also reluctant to voice their opinions with the KNU.

Furthermore, Karen culture itself is in many ways inclined towards the culture of oppression, since Karen people are not used to questioning authority. Most villagers only think in terms of their livelihood. They don’t think in terms of organisation or politics. This can be traced back to the education system, where children have been taught by repeating after the teacher and simply accepting information. Children’s education in the villages has to be radically changed, students have to be encouraged to think critically and analyse information, not merely regurgitate answers.

Even the style of village meetings needs to be changed. For example, seating at meetings is usually set up according to each villager’s importance; people of higher importance sit higher than the other villagers. This might seem natural, but this causes an atmosphere of domination and can prevent some villagers from having the confidence to express their ideas, or question what they are told.

Similarly, when outsiders visit the villages, villagers often assume that the outsider is smarter, more worldly and more capable than themselves. So, they simply accept what the outsider tells them, rather than thinking critically.

When I asked one CBO worker if he feels optimistic that this culture is changing, he says that even though process is slow, it is changing.

“It takes a generation,” he says “and it must start in the schools.”

The trick, he says, is not to get involved in preaching politics, rather, it is to encourage grassroots people to solve problems and form their own analysis. By achieving this, the people’s ability to participate in long existing village administration structures will be enhanced. This, in turn, brings benefits not only to the village itself, but also on a bigger scale. Perhaps the traditional village system will one day provide the catalyst for the empowerment of Burma as a nation.
Facing up to responsibility: The lack of action by members of the UNSC, ASEAN and the junta

By Naw Cha Mu

Activists were deeply disappointed by the failure of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to adopt the draft resolution on Burma on January 12th this year. The resolution was vetoed by two permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – Russia and China - and one non-permanent member, South Africa.

The UNSC has the power to determine when a threat to international peace exists and recommend what action should be taken to bring about a resolution to the situation. Article 39 of the UN charter, states that “the Security Council shall determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression and shall make recommendations, or decide what measures shall be taken in accordance with articles 41 and 42, to maintain or restore international peace and security”. As the UN was created by the governments of the world to stop wars between countries, not to stop conflict within a country – in the case of Burma where the government wages war against its own people - it makes it more difficult for the UNSC to adopt a resolution.

The United States and European Union member states of the UNSC said Burma’s human rights, refugee flows, drugs flows and HIV/AIDS spreads a risk to regional peace and security. These issues have an impact beyond Burma’s borders – they also affect neighbouring countries.

By looking at Burma carefully, it is clear that the military regime oppresses its own people through human rights abuses (such as torture, rape, unlawful killings, force labour, child soldiers), drug trafficking, the spread of HIV/AIDS, attacking the civilian population that has led to an increased number of Internally Displaced People (half a million in eastern Burma alone) and increasing refugee flow to neighbouring countries (nearly 700,000 people within the Asian region). The overall situation in Burma has severely deteriorated and it continues to worsen - posing a serious risk to peace and security in the region. It is also clear that the junta is unwilling to address these issues. A UNSC resolution, which is binding for all members of the UN, can force them.

One reason the resolution in January failed to pass was because of China and Russia’s economic interest in Burma. China signed a contract with the Burmese junta in Nay Pyi Taw (the new capital of Burma) to explore and extract gas four days after they vetoed the UNSC resolution according to Xinhua News Agency. Russia sold weapons and a nuclear reactor to the military junta, and China has invested in Burma’s dam projects as well as their gas fields. One must question whose best interest China and Russia were looking out for when they vetoed the UNSC resolution because it certainly was not the people’s.

After vetoing the resolution Russia and China claimed the reason that they vetoed was that the current domestic situation in Burma does not constitute a threat to international or regional peace and security. They both claimed that Burma’s problems between the military junta and the ethnic groups are the internal affairs of Burma and should be handled by Burma’s regime and the people themselves through consultation.

But what is the next step? Some activists believe it is necessary to make China feel more responsible for the lack of progress in Burma and for them to play a greater role in Burma’s transition to a democracy. Others feel that increased efforts to lobby ASEAN to impose sanction (which the UNSC can do) against Burma are needed.

We can clearly see that the current sanction against Burma from the US and EU are not very effective - even with the US and EU sanction on Burma, the Burmese military doesn’t care, because China and India continue to support them. As Burma is a country with plentiful natural resources including natural gas, mineral deposits, precious metals and gems, high quality tropical hardwoods and marine fisheries countries want to invest and exploit these resources. And the

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generals are happy to let them. China, India and ASEAN are aware of the economic potential in Burma and they turn a blind eye to the massive human right violations.

The regime depends on foreign investment and foreign trade for a substantial part of its income and it is essential to cut those lifelines. By cutting this lifeline the regime will have to face the difficulty to strengthen their military troops. Effective sanctions are very important tools to bring the regime to the negotiating table and that means getting ASEAN, China and India imposed sanction on Burma.

Activists are all aware of the importance of change in Burma, and welcome the UNSC concern about the deteriorating situation in Burma, including the massive violations of human right. According to Win Min an exile Burmese researcher specialising on the UNSC, since Burma was put on the UNSC agenda the junta released some ‘88 generation student leaders, which while not a democratic change is still significant. We as activists encourage the UNSC and ASEAN to work together, in structured cooperation, to help bring positive change to Burma. Otherwise there will be a continued threat to the stability of the region, which remains fragile, and beyond.

However, the Burmese military junta must also be a part of the solution. The junta should work with different groups to restore a genuine democratic system to the country and respect all human rights. They also need to listen to the calls from the people of Burma. The people of Burma no longer want to remain locked in a nightmare of dire poverty, disease and oppression by the military regime. They want change and the people of Burma know that the dictatorship will not last forever.

Activists strongly urge the UNSC to pass a resolution on Burma in order to make genuine change in Burma, to restore democracy and for the release all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi. It is not a matter of winning or losing a vote on the UNSC. It is a matter of changing the situation in Burma for millions of men, women and children. We continue to look to UN Security Council and wait for them to help reduce the people of Burma’s suffering.

**THREAT TO PEACE AND SECURITY**

The situation in Burma is not isolated to geographical boundaries of the Union of Burma - it spills over into other sovereign states as well. These spill over effects are not small, rather they are substantial transnational effects, which threaten to destabilize regional and international peace and security.

When examining threats to security, it is necessary to look beyond the traditional threats, such as an external hostile threat, to more non-traditional threats, for example health issues. As the global community continues to develop and as countries become to be more interdependent the non-traditional threats to peace and security are more likely to have an increased destabilizing impact. ASEAN has recognised this, and is currently in the process of developing a comprehensive regional security plan, which looks at traditional and non-traditional threats to peace, to address this issue.

The United Nations Security Council has the power to determine a threat to peace, under Chapter VII, Article 39 of the UN Charter. Threats to peace and security are determined on a case-by-case basis – there is no set criteria. Past internal situations, within a country’s national boundaries, where the UNSC has past a resolution deeming a situation a threat to peace and security can be used as a guide.

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<th>Conflict Among factions</th>
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Karen people mostly live in Burma’s hilly eastern region and the west of Thailand. There are two main groups of Karen: the Sgaws and Pwos. Both groups have a different dialect and written alphabet. Religiously the majority of Karen people are either Animists or Buddhists; however, 30 per cent of the population are Christians. Traditionally, most Karen are farmers.

The Karen are known for their colourful clothes. The Karen people weave their clothes by themselves. There is meaning behind some colours used in Karen clothing. Red, for instance, signifies courage, blue loyalty and white purity. These three colours are common in the Karen community.

The traditional Karen shirt is called the “Hse” and is worn by both men and women. The “Hse” is simply two rectangular pieces of cotton cloth joined at the sides to form a “sack” with holes for the neck and arms.

Traditionally single women commonly wore long, white blouses. It means that they are unmarried. Married women can not wear the long white blouses – they have to wear black Karen shirts. Men know if a woman is single or not by of the colour of their shirt.

For Karen men, they traditionally wear a “Piso” instead of pants. The “piso” is made out of a tube of material. It is worn around your waist. A knot has to be tied around the waist to prevent it from slipping off. It is not common for men to wear different types of clothes. They usually wear a red Karen shirt (Hse) and a red or blue “piso”.

Nowadays, the Karen people do not follow the clothing traditions. Single women also wear black Karen shirts. Karen materials are being used for modern styles of clothing. In the city, it is rare to see Karen people wearing traditional clothing.

Sources:
www.kwekalu.net
www.karen.org


The US will tighten economic sanctions on the leaders of the regime and their financial backers, impose an expanded visa ban on those responsible for the most egregious violations of human rights, as well as their family members and will facilitate the efforts of humanitarian groups working to alleviate suffering in Burma.

Bush also urged the UN and the international community to use their diplomatic and economic leverage to help the Burmese people reclaim their freedom.

Calls for UN Security Council to act: UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown called for an urgent UN Security Council meeting on Burma and urged the military regime there to be restrained in reacting to protests.

“I hope the Security Council will meet immediately, meet today and discuss this issue and look at what can be done,” Mr Brown said.

“The first thing that should be done is the UN envoy should be sent to Burma to make them directly aware that any trampling of human rights that takes place is unacceptable.”

“I think the international pressure that can be made to be felt in the next few days is incredibly important. I want to see the whole of the world getting together on this. Each continent of the world can come together,” Brown said.

Crackdown on protestors: Burmese security forces fired directly on protesting monks and other demonstrators in Rangoon, reportedly killing five monks and one woman in separate Rangoon clashes, according to unconfirmed reports.

On-the-scene eyewitnesses said the monks died when troops and security forces opened fire on at least two separate demonstrations. Troops reportedly fired over the heads of protestors on some occasions and fired directly at protestors on other occasions.

The reports of deaths and injuries were impossible to confirm.

The deaths reportedly occurred as different columns of monks walked through the city.
Burma Issues was founded in 1990 as a private non-profit organisation devoted to peacefully addressing Burma’s struggle for human rights and democratic rule. Burma Issues operates under the umbrella of the Peace Way Foundation. The Peace Way Foundation was given legal status as a non-governmental organisation in 2002.

Our organisation believes that all ethnic groups within Burma have the right to equality in all areas of life and to live in a society free from ethnic chauvinism. Burma Issues’ bottom-up approach to building a grassroots movement plays a significant role in offering non-violent participatory solutions that come from the people inside Burma’s grassroots communities. The movement’s work directly confronts chauvinism by introducing sustainable, just alternatives to their situation.

Our aim:
To participate in building up a people’s movement of the marginalized people that is capable of carrying out the long-term struggle necessary to bring a true and lasting peace with justice to Burma.

Our objectives:
♦ To systematically document the events of the past and present them through a documentation centre, in order to do effective analysis and to create strategies for building a better future. This will focus on information for the internal movement and for external supportive campaigns.
♦ To build up activists who have a vision for true change in Burma, are responsible and disciplined and are clear in the nature of their commitment for the long-term struggle.
♦ To encourage grassroots people to lead the struggle for social, economic and political change in Burma.
♦ To build up international awareness and support for the struggle in Burma by acting as a bridge between the grassroots people and the international support community in such a way that the grassroots people help international support groups focus actions on the critical issues which prolong the country’s cycle of war.