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The Tough Road to Real Economic and Political Reform:

How long must Burma struggle for change?

By Cha Mu

If we now look carefully to the present realities of our nation, there are lots of reasons to be suspicious and to be frustrated. The situation seems to get worse all the times. The economic crises continue, and political reforms seem to be too far away to expect. People around the world have expressed concern through various public demonstrations demanding economic and political reform in Burma.

Indeed Burma needs economic and political reform, which should completely eliminate domination by private companies, power holders, individuals, and corruption. The private companies and powerful industrial nations continue to dominate and dictate their own need and interests. If we cautiously analyze what is happening throughout the world, we have seen only rich people getting richer while most people are getting poorer and poorer. The majority of those people continue to be marginalized and suffer from malnutrition and poverty, lack of food, shelter, inadequate health services and receive a very low level of education.

Nowadays the price of many commodities, notably oil and food, is high which causes genuine economic damage, rising inflation and a reversal of globalization. In the years 2007 and 2008 world food prices increased, creating a global crisis and causing political and economic instability and social unrest in both poor and developing nations. For instance, in Burma rice exports dropped over four decades from nearly 4 million tons to only about 40,000 tons last year. Additionally, on 3 May 2008 cyclone Nargis wiped out Burma’s main rice growing areas, flooding them with salt water. According to U.N. food and agriculture organization estimates these areas produce 65 percent of the South Asia country’s rice. This situation put the spotlight on Burma as a poor country and pushed a huge number of Burmese people across the border to illegally enter neighboring countries.

Burmese people are realizing that under the military regime their economic fundamentals have almost collapsed. This fact is aggravated by the unrestrained regime practice of corruption, conspiracy and discrimination among the political and economic elite. Monopoly, cronyism, and favoritism have become common practice among the political and economic power holders. For example, a son of Tay Za, a Burmese businessman, recently bought the London Cigarette Company, a large cigarette maker in Burma, and is believed to control the tobacco industry in Burma.

Furthermore, we have seen people from Burma becoming illegal immigrants by the thousands and hundreds of thousands into neighboring countries due to severe economic conditions and political instability. The political situation in Burma has always been unpredictable. The conflict between the minority groups and the ruling Junta is never ending. There was a military coup in 1962, an antigovernment students’ demonstration in 1988, and the September Saffron Revolution in 2007, which the military regime security forces suppressed by using force against monks to break up the peace demonstration. The 1990 election results were
blatantly ignored by the Junta, and Aung San Su Kyi continues to be kept under house arrest. The result of the civil war between different armed ethnic groups creates an exodus of political refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) along the Thai Burma border.

Continuously, we witness in increasing numbers, not only “political refugees” but also “economic refugees” around the world. When talking about the refugees, most people think of “political refugees” not “economic refugees.” If there are adequate jobs in Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, there is little or no reason for these “economic refugees” to go to neighboring countries. Recently Asia was shaken due to the collapse of the US financial crisis. New York’s budget director concluded the state of New York was officially in a recession. Consequently thousands of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand are returning home after losing their jobs or getting only half pay because of the economic slow down. According to Mizzima news, about half of the factories in Mae Sod on the Thai Burma border have at present ceased operation or laid off workers due to a lack of new orders.

It has been eleven years since Burma joined the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which opened up an enlarged market and links to international aid. The country has not prospered as expected and the economy still runs on the black market. The economic reforms developed by the Junta are ineffective and the country still suffers high employment and deep poverty. The over-all situation in Burma remains awful, Burma’s citizens live subject to the arbitrary dictates of the military. In ethnic minority areas, there are continuing reports of extrajudicial killing, rape and murder. The Burmese military regime launched a large scale offensive in Northern Karen state in November 2005, targeting the civilian Karen population. More than 27,000 people have been forced from their homes, either hiding in the jungle or trying to find refuge in Thailand.

Unfortunately one of the fundamental principles of ASEAN “Non-interference in the international affairs of one another” has limited the success of the policy attempt to persuade the Junta to espouse national reconciliation with its political opponents.

Western governments, including the United States and European Union, want ASEAN to push for reform in Burma. The EU and U.S. maintain tough economic sanctions on Burma because of its poor human rights record. The sanctions include an arms embargo, a ban on all new U.S. investment, the suspension of all unilateral aid, the withdrawal of GSP privileges, visa restrictions on Burma’s senior leaders and a hold on all new lending or grant programs by the World Bank, the IMF, the ADB and other international financial institutions. Burma is the only country in ASEAN to be the target of Western sanctions and is widely considered to be the worst violators of human rights. Realistically, “Do the EU and U.S. sanctions really affect Burma?” When talking about sanctions consider China, who has been silent over Burma’s human rights abuses and ready to sustain them. China has strong trade and business ties with the Burmese regime. The value of trade between China and Burma rose 37.7 percent in the first three quarters of 2007. Chinese mainly exports textiles, steel and refined oil products to Burma. China also sells military goods, equipment, and vehicles to the Burmese regime. Imports from Burma include timber, natural rubber and cane products.

Many ASEAN leaders are getting frustrated with Burma’s refusal to establish political and economic reform. In January 2006, Razali Ismail, the UN special envoy to Burma, resigned in frustration because the ruling Burmese regime would not allow him to enter the country. He tried to persuade the military regime to hold talks with Aung San Suu Kyi but the regime clearly ignored his request and banned him from Burma. It is these shameful acts and attitudes of the military regime which have been used to deny the concerns of the international communities.
With this appeal, the international community needs to work together and put more pressure on Burma. Indeed, this doesn’t mean just sitting and calling for change. Change will never happen unless people take action. The ASEAN countries need to show its seriousness in solving the massive of human rights violations in Burma, persuade the regime to restore democracy in Burma and support the people’s movement in Burma. To achieve this is no easy matter. We should not be deceived that it is. We need to struggle and fight for it. It will definitely take time. We also need to realize that there are severe risks involved in such a struggle. We all need to work together to bring Peace and Justice to Burma.

Utilizing the children in armed forces: Brutal treatment of Children as child soldiers in Burma

By Volcano

Maung Kyaw Min Thu was 14 years old and he was recruited into Burma’s army. He was picked up by the Burmese soldiers while he came back from his uncle house. His uncle reports the case to Insine township State Peace and Development council. Finally he learnt that his son was in Danayae Gone (Insine village trap) army recruit center. When he went to the army recruit center the authorities told him he needs to bring the person who brought Kyaw Min Thu for his release.” Maung Kyaw Min Thu was recruited by the Burmese army without our permission” said Maung Kyaw Min Thu’s parents. “Now he is still in the recruited center.” They added.

In article 2, on the right of the child state Parties shall ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into armed forces.

Children have right to play, to study, and to be under care of the parent. Children have the same general human rights as adults. Children need the support of their families and every member of society. They are natural resource of their family and their society.

International law prohibits government forces or armed groups from recruiting children under the age of eighteen. Such recruitment has been recognized as a war crime under the status for the International Criminal Court.

Different from this, in Burma, children who live under the control of the dictatorship are being badly recruited as a child soldiers and they have to face physically and mentally abuse when they are in the army camp. Their gun is taller than their body and their uniform is bigger than their high. Child soldiers are not only appearing in Burma’s army camps also in arms oppositions groups.

According to Human Right Watch, there are at least 22 military training camps in Burma. Training generally lasts between four and half and five months. The news recruits were typically sent to one of two large recruitment holding centers near Yangon and Mandalay.

The conditions cause child soldiers to suffer from mentally, emotionally and physically exhaustion. “The child soldiers are bullied by the old recruited. Sometimes the old recruited kick their ass.” Said Joseph, Children are served as reporters, cooks or servants for higher ranking officers. Children are forced to do violence and commit human rights violation. Children are easier to control and brainwash in the military. In short they become a well kill machine.

Burma is Unique in the region, as the only country where government armed forces forcibly recruit and use children between the ages of 12 and 18. Children have been used as spies, potter, clear landmines, and even as human shield servant or cooks in the Army. As the child soldiers got lack proper training and experience and have limited life skills. So if they make a mistake they are battle by the adult soldiers.

Burma is the country with the highest level of child soldiers in the world. The Burmese re-
The regime known as State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) always claimed that they are falsely accused by the international community for using child soldiers. They also denied in the past at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) at its 2003 debate on the issues.

According to Human Rights Watch, there are an estimated 400,000 soldiers in the Burmese military used by SPDC. 20 percent of them are under age of 18 which forcibly recruited into its army.

Burma’s Army recruits the children by using threats, orders, intimidation and often violence to force young boys to become soldiers. Without their parent’s permission they are sent to military training camps where they are routinely beaten and brutally punished if they trying to escape. The Burma’s army frequently recruits boys at train and bus station and markets.

According to the report of the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) most children interviewed for the report were forcibly recruited into army ranks and Children may be recruited for several reasons. In countries that are already poor, war tends to deteriorate economic and social conditions, thereby forcing families into further economic hardship. As a result, children may join armed forces or groups to secure daily food and survival. Conflict is also likely to disrupt children’s education. When schools are closed, children are left with few alternatives and may be more easily persuade to join armed groups or forces.

In Burma the concept of children being recruited into national army and rebel armies is one that horrifies most people. Children’s human right violated on a massive level whether they are voluntarily or forcefully recruited to be part of a military.

The use of children soldiers in Burma is something that needs to be changed; the children need a normal upbringing and education. The children should grow up with the support of the society or families to gain their valuable future life.

The action is needed now to halt the use of children soldiers in the army and need the international organization to give pressure to the Burmese government who force the children to be involved in the army.

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"I Dream of Home"

By: Eh Doe Doh Moo
My home is in Burma but I survive in Malaysia:

The place where I was born never gave me a secure life and always caused problems for me.

By: Ta Sor Htee

Saw Sam (Not his real name) is a 47 year old, Burmese Karen man. He has been living in Malaysia for 15 years. He works illegally but runs his own business in Malaysia. He was forced to flee his village because of the military offensive. He fled the conflict from eastern Burma to cross the border to Thailand. He was told that there are better work opportunities than in Thailand. So he paid money to brokers to smuggle him to Malaysia.

Below Saw Sam tells his story to the readers

My father was the village level council chairman in our village and the Burmese military regime accused him of having contact with rebels. The military regime battalion 53 and 60 led by Commander Khin Maung Hla tortured my father in the village church and detained him for a month. They release him at Than Taung. My father had an injury on his head and broke three of his ribs after the torture of the military regime. We sold out all our cattle and property to pay to cure him. He suffered the pain from the torture until he died on the 8th of August 1998.

I was fourteen and studied at grade five when the military regime arrested and tortured my father. After the arrest I left school for two years to work for my family. After working two year for the family I left home and joined the Karen resistance for another two years. After that I went home and continue my study for one more year. In January 1983, I got married and ran a small business. Unfortunately I had to leave my village in 1986 and then worked in cattle trading between Bu Has Khee (Toungoo district) and Saw Hta, which is located on the Salween bank opposite Mae Hong Son district (Thailand). I left my village because the military regime arrested my brother (who joined the Karen resistance) in the village and they captured him, cut off his throat and his belly.

In 1992, the military regime started a very strong offensive in Htee Moo Khee, Mu Traw district in eastern Burma of Karen state. One hundred and twenty (120) cattle were around Htee Moo Khee area so I couldn’t go back and I took them to the border to sell them to Thailand. Eighty of my cattle died, I was in big debt and fled to Thailand from Saw Hta to Mae Sot.

In 1994, I decided to go to Malaysia in order to find work. I paid five thousand baht (138.546$) to brokers and they took me to Malaysia. I did many different jobs in Malaysia. I worked in factories, construction, restaurants, gas stations, animal farming, baked bricks and cleaned. I lived and worked without
any work permission papers. I sent money for my family but as I couldn’t go back home for a long time my wife married a Burmese captain. I live illegally in Malaysia but the Malaysian police have never arrested me. I had a car accident once, was one time hit by lightening and was attacked by a big snake twice.

In early 2003, I started working in the star fruit farm; in the same year in November the owner of the farm sold it to me. I married a Chin woman and then started working on the farm. I own all of the start fruit trees and fish in the pond. According to the Malaysia law, the land belongs to the state so I do not own the land. I sell the star fruit to European countries. From this farm each year I make 20,000 Malaysia Ringgits (5370.57$).

I have two sons left in Burma. One of them came to see me in December 2006 and one arrived in July 2007. I have more people to feed but have more people to work with me in the farm. In 2007, I applied for the refugee status in Malaysia, in hope of resettling to the United States. We have to live in fear so I decided to resettle to United States and live there peacefully. When there are changes in Burma I will truly come back and live in my home.

Many Karen people like Saw Sam and other ethnic people from inside Burma and from the border areas leave and go to find work in Malaysia. Many of them work legally with work permit, however, some work without work permit and over-stay their visa in Malaysia to avoid paying tax to the Burmese military regime. Some of them come from the Thai Burma border and travel illegally to Malaysia and work illegally.

Malaysian police often give problems to the Burmese workers; even those who have a legal work permit. Most of the Karen people working in Malaysia will have contact with the Malaysia Karen Organization (MKO). If they have any problems with the police or are detained by the Malaysian authorities they can contact MKO who help them out. There are many Burmese workers who have no contact with the MKO. When they get arrested the police detain them and if no one helps them, the police will contact human traffickers and sell them to the human traffickers. Again these human traffickers sell them to the fishermen and these people never find their way back.

Malaysia Karen Organization (MKO) developed to serve the Karen people in Malaysia. The purpose is to protect the Karen people, preserve the Karen culture in Malaysia and to find possible opportunities to contact the UNHCR in Malaysia for the protection of the Burmese refugees in Malaysia. MKO also opened a school for the Burmese children whose parents are living and working in Malaysia. Many people hold a passport and work legally in Malaysia and they travel back home to Burma so they cannot openly work in any activities related to human rights or politics. At the same time many people live and work illegally so they also cannot openly carry out any Human Rights activities in Malaysia, as they have to avoid the arrest by the Malaysian authorities.

There is no doubt that the migrant workers have contributed much to the economic development of Malaysia. Migrant workers contribute to the economic by supplying a cheaper labor force, however their contribution are often not recognized and forgotten.
I am a student, was born in Sittway, Rakhine State in Burma. My parents are U Aung Win and Daw Ma Kyi. I have 3 brothers and 5 sisters. In 1961, my father served as a clerk in Sittway district civil court and Section judge court. he became a lawyer after his retirement from the past service. In 1986, he wrote an appeal letter addressing Burma’s land seizing law, when the land of a group of farmers was seizure by Ney Win government. In this regards, he was arrested under emergency acts 5 Nya (Political Act) and was jailed for 2 years in Sittway Prison.

While my father was in prison, I was only six standard. At that time my family struggled and barely survives. Sometimes our family had nothing to eat. Even though my father heard the bad news of our family, he could not help us because he was in Sittway Prison.

Every Sunday, I had to voluntarily work where the government forced the people to build roads and the governmental buildings. I had to carry bricks, stone and clean the shrubbery with other people. One day, in 1993, I had to carry earth to fill a land as a forced laborer on building road. When it was time to go for the evening, one of the Burmese security forces struck my back with a bamboo stick vigorously.

After I matriculated in 1999, I was admitted to study International Relation at Dagon University but I was not allowed to Yangon because beginning in 1991, the government had prevented all Arakanese people who believe in Islam or Hindu from traveling around the country. So I transferred my major to Zoology and I studied at University of Sittway for 3 years in a BSc degree course. I had to transfer into this major because the ministry of education of Myanmar (Burma) had prevented Arakanese Muslims from studying professional subjects or subjects related to Human Rights, Law or Politics.

While I was studying in Sittway University, I worked part time as an assistant at the office of Border Trade Limited (Myanmar (Burma)-Bangladesh). I earned 20 thousands kyats (19.8 $) per month and spent the money for my school fees and supplies. Sometimes I worked as a volunteer night guard and health educator at the office of MSF (Holland) in Sittway. After my three year BSc degree course, I resigned from my part time job.

I tried again to travel to Yangon to find a better job at some companies, but I could not do that. If I went to Yangon illegally, I would have been imprisoned for 7 years. If any Muslims travel to Yangon, he or she will be imprisoned for 7 or 10 years. If any one travels to another town from his or her residence, he or she will be sentenced to 2 years imprisonment. This regional rule was legislated by the government for Muslims in Rakhine State. I have struggled to escape from this government’s trap.

First of September, 2006 I traveled from Sittway to Bangladesh by boat by means of black market trade. The boat carried 9 bulls and a buffalo which were sold in Bangladesh. On that day, the weather was very bad and I vomited the whole way. I stayed in Chittagong, Bangladesh for six months and I came to Thailand by a small boat with other Muslims because I could not return back to my home town. If I went back to Sittway, I would have stayed in Sittway Prison.

On 13th of February, 2007 I tried to get on the boat but I fell down from the boat; my body and clothes soaking wet with the sea water near Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh; I swam to reach the beach. The boat that left without carrying three of us was in trouble in the Bay of Bangle because of the bad weather; they turned again to Bangladesh.
The next week, on 20th of February, we had to trudge and wade through a muddy beach for two hours to get on this boat. The mud reached above my knees; some people who were related to local police spied on us.

The boat left to leave from Bangladesh at mid night on 21st of February, 2007. During this period of our travel to Thailand, we lost our way in the Indian Ocean and reached to an island that is belongs to Burma. We were arrested by Burmese troops, however they provided oil, rice and drove us to the Indian Ocean again. We were again arrested near another island that also belongs to Burma. I was examined by immigration, navy and military overnight. Immigration tried to shoot me with pistol but the other military and navy officers prevented him from killing me. Still I was tortured for four hours. The next morning, while immigration and a judge were trying to sentence me to long terms imprisonment by accusing me of human trafficking, two chief-of-staff (army and navy) ordered to release all of us. Then the navy ship towed our boat to the Bay of Thailand over night and released us.

I arrived in Thailand on the 5th of March, 2007. I was arrested by Thai Marine Police and I had to stay in the cell for one week at Panga, Rangnong and IDC in Bangkok. I did have one Burmese Longyi to wear but no any shirt or other clothing to cover my body. Then they took me to Mae Sot and handed me over to Democratic Karan Buddhist Army (DKBA) Mya Wa Dyi, Burma on 13th of March, 2007. I had to pay 3,000 Baht (86$) to escape from the DKBA; the broker took me to Mae Sot again in the evening. I had to cross the Thai-Burma border in the evening.

One person was paralyzed; he could not walk. I had to carry him partly, sometimes I slipped over the mud and tripped over the tree stump; I was injured by broken glass. I stayed in Mae Sot for one week and then came to Chiang Mai on 21st of March, 2007 with the help of broker. I joined a program that was affiliated with Chiang Mai University and studied a course including some political subjects and human rights at the University for a few months.

I decided to go back to Yangon because it is not easy to study and stay in Thailand without a passport. There were many checkpoints along the road, so some people had to help me cross the checkpoints. I had to stay in a car that carried 25 tanks of CNG gas for three nights, and I reached Mawlamyine, Mon state. The next day, two Muslims from Mawlamyine took me to Rangoon by train. When I arrived in Rangoon I applied for a passport with help of some friends and some passport officers and I got it. After I got my passport I came to Thailand again by air after Cyclone Nargis.

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A threat to the indigenous villages:
Tenessarim Dam Project

By Kwekalu

The State Peace and Development (SPDC) newspaper New Light of Myanmar has reported that the military regime has planned to build a dam on the Tenesarrim river to produce 600 MW of hydroelectric power. Related to this dam project the Karen National Union (KNU) Mergui Tayoy district has stated that ten villages along the Tenessarim River will be destroyed if this dam is built and people will face many unpredicted problems.

The New Light of Myanmar (The state owned newspaper) reported that two companies from Thailand and Singapore have signed the MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with the SPDC so that they will also receive hydroelectric power from the dam on the Tenessarim river in the Southern Burma.

Source from KNU Mergui Tayoy reported that the SPDC is working on a geographical survey in two areas on the Tenessarim River for the dam project. One of the surveys is on the lower part of Tenessarim river at K’ Wer Ta village and the other one is at Kwe Waw Wa village which is under the special control are of KNU Mergui Tayoy district.

However, none of the information can yet be officially confirmed said P’ doh Toe Khin Maung the vice secretary of KNU Mergui Tayoy district. "We don’t know which groups or which companies are going to work on this project in this area, there was no official dialogue or reports about this project”

“If the dam was built on the lower part of the
river there are ten villages which will be destroyed by flood," said an official of the KNU who does not want to be named.

In May 2008 the KNU Defense Organization battalion number (7) occupied the SPDC dam survey area at Ker Wer Ta on the Tenessarim river and captured several items of the survey equipments include two digital cameras and one GPS.

P’ Doh Toe Toe Khin Maung said that area in which the SPDC plan the dam project is an indigenous village area and it is their land, their home and their livelihood since the time of their ancestors. If the dam is built the indigenous’ land will be totally destroyed and moreover, they will have to evacuate to other areas where many obstacles and problems will follow them. Aside from this the project also will have big affect on the environment. In this case the KNU is standing strongly against this project.

A KNU official who does not want to be named has said that in October 2008 the SPDC flew from the beginning of the Tenessarim River to the other end to measure the length of the river.

The civilians who live on the Tenessarim River earn their living by traditional cultivation, fishing and farming. If the dam is built in K’ Waw Wa area K’ Moe Thwe and Paw Klo area also will be flooded and this flood will cover more than their villages. Since 2007 until the present day the SPDC lumber company called Kyi Minn Khaing and Thai lumber companies are carry out logging in this area.

The community in this area doubt that the dam could be built after these companies traded all the trees said a Kwekalu co-worker. Kwekalu is a Karen language newsletter.

A KNU Mergui Tavoy officer who does not want to be named said that if the dam was built on the Tenessarim River, the flood would destroy the people’s land. Karen or Burman ethnic will face troubles and become refugees and the military regime will not be taking any responsible for the cause of this. The purpose of this project is for the benefit of the SPDC alone and also to make the opposition group unable to operate in this area.

Burma’s neighboring countries and many other Asian countries, which have high demand for electrical power are paying special attention and interest to this dam project. China and Thailand are the two countries investing the highest in the dam project in Burma. In 2004 several Chinese companies signed the MOU with Burma to build five dams, which include Salween dam, Irrawaddy dam and others.

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"If the dam is built the indigenous' land will be totally destroyed..."

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Smiles behind the iron fence

I was born in a refugee camp - a foreign land
I was told that a small bamboo house is my home
A life confined by barbed wire is not my home
A living fed by others is not my home
A life without dignity is not my home
Freedom and equality is what I want
To uphold my beautiful home

By Eh Doh Doe
In the North and North east of Burma are found the savage tribes, which call “Kachins”. They call themselves “Chimpaws”. The Kachins are not aborigines but come from the North and probably from some part of Tibet. Kachin state has Burma’s highest mountain, Hkakabo Razi, at 5889 meters in height. The capital of the state is Myitkyina. The Kachin state has Burma highest mountain Hkakabo Razi (5,889 metres (19,320 ft)), forming the southern tip of the Himalayas, and South-east Asia’s largest inland lake, Inawgyi lake.

The traditional Manau Festival is a blend dignity and delight. The men look warrior-like with their swords held in front and the women in their colorful and varied national costumes are captivating. of the variety of Kachin daces. The Manau dance is performed at Manau festivals, which originated as part of the “Nat” or Spirit worship of the past. There are ten kinds of Manau festivals held in commemoration of some special event such as a successful harvest.

The economic of Kachin state is predominantly agricultural. The main products include rice and sugar cane. Mineral products include jade and good. The traditional religious is animist but missionary activities since Britain period have converted the vast majority of the population to Christianity.

Men and women marry as a rule between ten and twenty years according to circumstances. Families which are somewhat well to do, pay at an early age for a bride for their son. They fear that others may take the girls they wish to have, and sometimes they even ask for her before she is ten years old. They then perform the ordinary marriage ceremonies, but the young wife does remain with her parents till a convenient age.

If a woman husband died she is generally married to a brother in law or a cousin in law. If nobody marries her, she may after agreement with the relatives, go back to her own family.

The poor are less in hurry to settle their children, it is seldom nevertheless tile let their boys reach twenty before giving them a companion, and they nearly always have a chance to marry their daughters about their fifteenth or eighteenth years. If the men ask for younger before the elder sister they must in addition give a buffalo to compensate the later.

What the parents leave to the children generally is not too much, the rich parents often hand down small fields, some oxen or buffaloes, tam tams, at times some money etc... the poor leave their huts and domestic Nats for a legacy.

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news briefs

thailand and rohingya issues:

Burma’s No 2 leader, Vice Snr-Gen Maung Aye, has promised the Thai military supreme commander during an official visit to Burma that authorities will try to stem the flow of Rohingya refugees who try to reach neighboring countries illegally, according to the Thai News agency (TNA).

It is estimated that up to 20,000 illegal Rohingya migrants have entered Thailand over the years and remain within the kingdom. Hundreds of refugees travelling in open boats were reported recently to have been turned back by the Thai navy, but Thai authorities denied allegations that they were being set adrift without food or water.

Burma’s Muslim Rohingya minority are victims of extreme regime discrimination and abuse—denied Burmese citizenship and freedom of religion and movement. Thousands continue to flee, trying to reach Malaysia in open boats—many of which only make it to Thailand.

A Rohingya, a speaking through a translator, said the Burmese military beat them with sticks. Others said the soldiers tried to set their boat on fire, and they showed severe body burns.

According to the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is estimated that up to 20,000 illegal Rohingya migrants have entered Thailand over recent years and remain in the country. Thailand said the Rohingyas boat people are mainly economic migrants and that there are no grounds to believe that they have fled from their country of origin for fear of being persecuted.

Thailand offered to host a regional conference to discuss the mass migration of Rohingya refugees. Foreign Ministry officials met with envoys from India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Burma to discuss the exodus of the Rohingyas from Burma, where they say they are persecuted economically and denied basic rights of citizenship.

Thai Premier Abhisit Vejjajiva said the UNHCR should be invited to participate in regional talks on the Rohingya migrant issue proposed by Thailand. The premier said the joint regional meeting would tackle the Rohingya problem at its root cause and hoped that the international community would come to a better understanding regarding Thailand’s stance on the migrant issue, according to a report on the website of the Thai News Agency.