“The solution to the problems of Myanmar must be attained essentially amongst the people of that country.” A spokesman for U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan
SEEKING JUSTICE

The assumption is that once these guilty individuals have been removed from the society, or at least from effective activity within the society, justice has been achieved. The weakness in this approach is that injustice lies not so much within individuals, but within attitudes and prejudices which can permeate all strata of the society and make it possible for some individuals to carry out acts of terrible violence against others. Therefore, removing individuals who have wreaked havoc on the lives of innocent villagers, does not necessarily guarantee those villagers that the attitudes which created their hell have been neutralized. The fear of a recurrence of injustice, thus, remains deep within their consciousness. True justice can not exist under these conditions.

Another definition of justice, which too often goes unnoticed, is that reflected in the words of an internally displaced farmer who said, “I just want to go back home with my family and live in my village peacefully.” While simple in terminology, this definition of justice is probably the most complex and demanding one to consider. “I want to go home,” is not merely a statement about physical movement from a jungle hideout back to a traditional village site. The statement implies the need to recognize and effectively address the root issues which drove the farmer and his family into the jungle in the first place. These issues are not properly dealt with simply by adhering to national or international legal procedures. Most often they require significant and serious social change by the society as a whole.

What the peasant farmer and his family require is a guarantee that the terrible suffering and terror they have experienced will not be repeated against them nor visited upon their children and grandchildren in the future. The imprisonment and/or execution of military leaders responsible for the past suffering is not a guarantee to them that new military leaders with the same destructive mentality will not rise up again soon. Their faith in leadership has been seriously damaged, and while laws can and must lay the foundation for protection of justice in the future, the victims of oppression have little reason to believe that those laws will actually be effective. They need something much more than court cases or the enactment of new laws, or even the establishment of a democratic system to believe that they can finally go home with their family and live in their village peacefully.

Justice for this peasant farmer, and millions of others like him, requires that the society look at the root causes of the long conflict and have the courage to carry out the significant social changes needed to rid the country of those deep-lying roots. It should be remembered that the present period of civil conflict started more than fifty years ago, during a time when Burma was emerging from a period of colonization and entering its first democratic era. The roots of the conflict, therefore, lie not with the present military domination per se, but with attitudes and prejudices within the society which led groups into rebellion because they believed that they could never be equal partners in the emerging independent nation, and which gave some corrupt military leaders the space they needed to establish their strangle hold over the entire country.

For the peasant family to feel a sense of true justice requires that the society clearly articulate these roots of injustice within the society and take responsibility for remedying them. It is not easy. It is a process which continues to be a struggle even in countries like the USA and Canada which have no dictatorship and which have sufficient laws for effective legal actions to protect justice. A true recognition of these roots of injustice implies that not only will the society recognize and take responsibility for them, but that new economic, cultural and political structures which need to be created as the nation moves into a postwar era.
SANCTIONS OR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT: THE DILEMMA OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY PART 1

In direct defiance of the striking down of Massachussetts' selective purchasing "Burma law" by a U.S. District Court on November 4th, the Los Angeles city council passed a similar law on December 14. L.A. became the latest locality to pass legislation restricting business with Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The town of Vincent became the third Australian city to join the ranks of local governments unwilling to support the totalitarian regime.

Sanctions remain the choice form of political intervention within the international arena. Immediately after the 1988 government crackdown the international community withdrew all but a small amount of humanitarian aid from Burma. After the military regime refused to hand over power to the parliament elected in 1990, the western world has slowly worked to put a greater distance between themselves and the junta. Aung San Suu Kyi, as the spokesperson for the party who won an 85% majority in that election, has consistently called for economic sanctions, influencing policy decisions such as the April 1997 ban on new U.S. investment in Burma.

Sanction proponents, however, are now facing difficult questions from all corners. The SPDC acted swiftly in jailing large numbers of National League for Democracy (NLD) members after Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party called for the convening of the Pyi Thu Hlutaw after Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party withdrew all but a small amount of humanitarian aid from Burma. After the military regime refused to hand over power to the parliament elected in 1990, the western world has slowly worked to put a greater distance between themselves and the junta. Aung San Suu Kyi, as the spokesperson for the party who won an 85% majority in that election, has consistently called for economic sanctions, influencing policy decisions such as the April 1997 ban on new U.S. investment in Burma.

Sanctions remain the choice form of political intervention within the international arena.

Investment, undoubtedly brings a higher level of development. The question that needs to be asked is: who exactly benefits. The case of the construction of the Yadana gas pipeline, cast some significant doubts that the grassroots are receiving the benefits of outside investment. The ongoing civil war between the Burma Army and ethnic minorities along the borders with Thailand, Bangladesh and India pretty much isolate these people 'as enemies of the state' from the benefits of any government associated project. In Yadana project the Karen people, whose land the pipeline was built through, actively suffered for the investment made by French Total and U.S. owned Unocal. The pipeline project was preceded by an army offensive to clear the entire fourth district of the Karen State, still held by insurgents. People were taken off their land and moved into fenced relocation sites. Others are living in the jungle, continually fleeing the army. The International Labor Organization and the U.S. Department of Labor have both cited the use of forced labor in the project. However, it is not just investment projects that take place in insurgent areas that lead to these human rights abuses. In a county where the ongoing civil war is a reality of life for many of the ethnic people and where a large percentage of the national budget goes into military spending, any investment that puts money in the coffers of the government, indirectly supports the ongoing military offensives against the ethnic minority people of Burma.

The companies currently in Burma would be hard pressed to come up with evidence that their presence has contributed to a greater degree of freedom and democracy in the country. Current investors in Burma are so tightly tied to governmental enterprises that they are largely unaware of the many human rights abuses taking place under their noses. One former protestor argued that foreign investors bring fax machines and e-mail, important tools in a country where communications is closely monitored. The small number of Burmese nationals who work for these companies, and have the opportunity to use this equipment, have some strong reasons not to become politically active. Those with both the skills and the luck to get corporate jobs are a tiny minority, and receive salaries several times that of a government bureaucrat – one of the other choice jobs in the country. In a country where political activism comes with the price of a jail sentence or worse and where people are going hungry, these individuals have enough to live comfortably and support their families.

The argument that outside investment can bring about positive change, rests largely on two assumptions. The ability to influence the political and economic system requires access to the citizen as well as the government. If the microcosm of democracy that companies bring to Burma is only experienced by those whose power is threatened by a democratic system, an ideological shift isn’t very likely. Lack of access to the people also brings the inability to monitor the effects of investment. Without a clear view of potential human rights violations indirectly caused by the investment, the investor is unable to act in accordance with their principles, voicing their concerns to those in power.

The second assumption is that companies investing have political change on their agenda. It is fairly clear that investment currently in the country is only helping the select few at the top of the system. It is the responsibility of the international community to understand clearly what it is supporting and withdraw support from that which it cannot morally condone.

E. Miller

1 Far Eastern Economic Review, Feb 1998
2 The Irrawaddy; Apr 15, 1998
FARMING IN THE RED: RURAL CONDITIONS IN BURMA

The rising cost of farming
One of the critical themes in U Nyunt’s statement, and a central issue for farmers just about everywhere is the availability of credit and affordable farming inputs. In Burma, both are increasingly hard to come by.

As seasonal changes in liquidity affect every farmer to some extent, borrowing and lending is an often indispensable part of rural life. In Southeast Asia, farmers follow the cycles of the rains—farmers typically eat better and have more cash following the main harvest at the end of the rainy season (around November), and generally have the least cash and the least food right before the harvest. Planting and harvesting periods require labor, irrigation, and other inputs—costs which generally come at times when farmers also have less money to pay for them. Cash flow is a fundamental concern that intersects with nearly all other issues for farmers, and these are numerous in Burma.

The annotations provided below are intended to provide background on the pressures bearing down not just on U Nyunt’s community, but on most of Burma’s farmers. However, even if a problem’s cause could be clearly identified and described, its effects are felt differently by everyone. U Nyunt’s own situation can be seen as typical only in that his problems are complex and interrelated, and how he is able to respond to them is determines his future survival as a farmer.

Based on interviews conducted in August 1996, with U Nyunt who has been farming for 35 years, and a number of other farmers.

“U NYUNT”
Why have you come to the [Thai-Burma] border?
I’ve come to sell my cattle.

Did you ever come previously?
I’ve come every year for the last five years. The reason is that I’ve had no money to grow paddy, so every year I’ve come to sell some cattle to get money.

How many cattle have you come to sell this time? Will the sale price be enough to get money to grow paddy?
I came to sell cows, and they don’t get so much money. Three cows. For the three I got 10,000 Thai baht. If you change that to kyat it’s about 80,000.

I have six acres of fields at my village. That land doesn’t yield too much paddy. If you use fertilizer then one acre can yield 60-70 baskets. If you don’t use it then it’s only 30-40. Last year, for six acres I got a total of 350 baskets. I used 14 bags of fertilizer. One bag of fertilizer was 3,000 kyat, so for 6 acres I spent 42,000 kyat.

I hired a ploughing machine at the rate of 3,000 kyat.

“I’ve had no money to grow paddy”

© Cultivation costs
According to government statistics, almost 44% of all landholding farmers in Burma have other sources of income (GOB, 1993) — and U Nyunt is clearly one of them. Many farmers are too small to turn a profit so farmers must find other income cover the costs of farming. Trading livestock is U Nyunt’s way to raise the money he needs to cover cultivation costs. Many other farmers work part of the year as loggers, traders, miners or day laborers to save enough cash to cover their planting or harvesting expenses. Thousands of the Burmese nationals who work illegally in factories and on plantations on the Thai-Burma border are likewise laboring to support farms in Burma. The cash that many send or carry home from Thailand quite literally enables their families to plant the next year’s rice.

Relative wealth
One of the reasons that U Nyunt is still managing to make it as a farmer, despite taxes, fees, and rising prices, is that by local standards at least, he’s not desperately poor. First of all, U Nyunt’s farm, at six acres, despite the fact that he describes it as poor land, is larger than the national average landholding of less than two acres. U Nyunt also has enough money to invest in assets like cattle, and apparently enough cash to transport them to a place where they’re likely to sell for the best price. His money gives him a certain amount of bargaining power and flexibility that many who are poorer cannot afford.

Fertilizer
Burma’s economic crisis has meant that even farmers with money often can’t get the inputs they need. There is a nationwide shortage of chemical fertilizer, which represents a serious issue for farmers. Those who can’t get or can’t afford enough fertilizer are faced with significantly lower yields: according to U Nyunt’s own estimates, not using fertilizer would reduce his harvest by about half. Government officials have acknowledged it as a national problem: “This [average] low yield per acre... was due to the fact that farmers in Myanmar in comparison with those of other countries used less fertilizers....” (NLM, 23 Jan 1998) It certainly does not intend to use less, the government puts significant effort into distributing fertilizers to farmers. But, as one farmer complained: “They [administrative officials] draw up registers and promise to provide one bag of discounted fertilizer per acre of farmland, but until now [the start of the planting] they’ve given nothing.” (Bl, June 1997)

Why does it not deliver? It may disappear into the black market via widespread corruption within Burma’s local and middle-level bureaucracy (see Bl, “Bureaucracy Days,” Feb 1998). Bad timing and bad management can have the same results: “The government distributes fertilizer when people don’t need it so people don’t go to get it. When people need it they don’t give it. People also can’t afford to buy it... Because of that, when we need it it’s unaffordable, and so we no longer use fertilizer and so also the paddy is no longer good” (Bl, 14 Aug 1997)

Ultimately, corruption and ineptitude only exacerbates what is a problem of economics. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, in a recent unofficial report pointed out: “In 1997/98 one of the factors for the decrease in paddy production was insufficient utilization of area fertilizer... To make matters worse, the shortfall of paddy production for three successive years means Burma cannot export significant volumes of rice and so was deprived of hard currency to import inputs.” (USDA, 1998) In other words, the government is facing the same problem as many farmers – it just doesn’t have enough cash to purchase fertilizer when they need it. Continued on page 5

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kyat per acre. Alternatively, if you can’t give money, you have to pay [the machine owner] 10 baskets of paddy for each acre [after the harvest].

You also have to give money to hire people to transplant seedlings and harvest [work which must be done quickly and labor intensively], so for my six acres I had 80–100,000 kyat total expenses. So the amount that I got by selling my three cows now will be completely used for this year’s harvest expenses.

How much paddy do you sell to the government?

For our village, it’s different from other villages. Because the paddy yield is low, so we only sell 6 to 8 baskets per acre. For my six acres I sell 48 baskets.©

How much money does MAPT [Myanmar Agricultural Produce Trading] pay per basket?

Last year, 190 kyat per basket. At first, we had heard that they would pay real market value, but we only got 190 kyat. At that time, the market price was 350–400 kyat per basket.

This year, have you ploughed yet?

We started in mid-May, and at the end of May we planted the seedlings. When I return, I’ll transplant the seedlings.

Will you get support from the government?

In our area, farmers with more than three acres are given [compulsory] support at the rate of 1,000 kyat per acre. So for my six acres, I get 6,000 kyat. That commits me to selling them the paddy quota.

This year did the government also loan money?

Last year in early May, the [state-run] “Agricultural Corporation” gave loans, but this year we haven’t seen them yet.©

Where do you have to go to give the quota?

About 10 miles away from our village, at a village paddy storage facility. For people with carts and bullocks, it’s no problem, but for people without, they have to rent these from others for a lot of money. For the trip of 10 miles, the rent is two baskets of paddy.©

Please explain about the general situation for farmers in your village.

Traditionally, in the monsoon we worked paddy, and in the summer worked on gardens. There is no way to get a lot of money. The vil...
The terror rained down on the rural people of Burma cannot simply be the social and economic structures and values which will guarantee them the kind of life they most cherish - a life in which their dignity and their way of living is fully respected and protected from any kind of economic, social or political exploitation.

To grow the summer crop, each year the stream must be dammed and an irrigation system built. The construction of this must be done by the villagers as “people’s contributions,” and we are instructed to go do this work for a month. [The work is temporary – simply blocking the stream with dirt and opening simple channels to fields. The following monsoon season, the works are destroyed by the rains and then must be repeated the following year.] This work must be done at the start of every summer, and so the farmers get no rest.


U Nyunt is one of the better-off farmers in Burma. He may be subject to many of the same economic pressures and government restrictions as most of Burma’s farmers – but until now he’s kept his land, and he’s managed to farm it without accumulating serious debt. His situation is stable, but precarious – like most farmers, he is living from harvest to harvest unable to accumulate any kind of security net.

To a large extent, Burma’s government is actually in worse shape economically. It is surviving from month to month, at the bottom of its currency reserves, and also in serious debt, and rumors persist that it may already be bankrupt. Of course, when a government goes bankrupt, it is the people, not the leaders who must do without. This year, the junta could not provide the food subsidies that are cornerstone of the salaries of thousands of soldiers and civil servants. Accompanying this news have been reports of increased desertions. The junta needs farmers like U Nyunt to keep getting better at producing rice, but is financially too weak to help them do it. Farmers and the junta share that concern: nobody can afford a bad harvest this year.

Continued from page 2

will be ones which the peasantry will easily understand, be able to participate in comfortably, and which will give them a sense of peace and security.

The terror rained down on the rural people of Burma cannot simply be forgotten and relegated to a silent past. The rapes, extrajudicial killings, constant forced relocations, forced labor and portering, hunger and deprivation of the past many decades remain etched too firmly and too clearly in the eyes of these peasants. Before they can go home with their families and live peacefully in their villages, they need assurance that the true causes of their suffering have been recognized by the society and the international community, and that serious steps are being taken to develop economic, political and social structures and values which will guarantee them the kind of life they most cherish - a life in which their dignity and their way of living is fully respected and protected from any kind of economic, social or political exploitation.

Max Ediger

ECONOMY

Continued from page 5

lage is in the forest, although there’s a car to Tavoy one time per day. It’s about 15 miles away and costs around 50 kyat per person, sometimes more, if the price of oil is up or people are few, 60-80 kyat.

From 1992 to the present, the Agricultural Corporation officials introduced a program to increase paddy yields. You have to crop exactly according to their method. For six years we have done like this. Our village has low quality soil, so unlike some other places, we don’t get too much paddy. The villagers lose all of their money because after working the monsoon crop we have to do the summer crop after that. The summer crop is a total loss for the farmers, but if you don’t do it, the government will take away your land. So, we lose our money, but nevertheless, we grow it.

© Green revolution

Through development initiatives, most in place since 1992, the junta has been pushing nationwide “green-revolution” style agricultural reforms designed to boost Burma’s rice exports and bring in desperately needed cash. The military junta’s special attention to agriculture is a reflection of its own fiscal interests. Participants in a recent government-sponsored symposium were apparently unanimous in their view that, another means of obtaining this end, “the most efficient way is through green-revolution style agricultural reforms.”


Dollars calculated at the current unofficial exchange rate of US$.29/100 kyat, AsiaWeek, 6 Nov 1998.
DECEMBER NEWS BRIEFS

Human Rights Day Message from Aung San Suu Kyi

In a prerecorded message to mark the 50th anniversary of the human rights declaration on December 10, Aung San Suu Kyi said the struggle for human rights in Burma, which was one of the original signatories when the declaration was adopted in December 1948, brought the people of Burma close to other peoples in the world who are striving for the recognition of their inherent dignity and their inalienable right to life, liberty and security. She thanked those who have supported the people of Burma in times of adversity and expressed hope that the country may soon one day “be a source of strength and support for those in need of peace, justice and freedom.”

The Nation, 5 Nov 1998

Seminar on National Solidarity

A seminar on National Solidarity, attended by representatives of 23 opposition groups, including ethnic nationalities, was held from 12th to 14th December 1998 at Thu-Mwe-Kalo, near the Thai-Burma border. The participants agreed unanimously that the contradiction between the military junta on one side and the oppressed people of all nationalities on the other, is the main contradiction in the society of Burma and that this is approaching a critical state. The representatives issued a statement saying they firmly believe that abolishing the military dictatorship and the building of future federal union can only be achieved through consolidated national strength. The seminar agreed to call upon all political parties and individuals, without discrimination, race, religion and political ideology, to join hands and work together. The representatives also supported the demand of the NLD to convene a people’s parliament.

“The Nation, 12 Dec 1998

Selective Purchasing Legislation

Both the city of Los Angeles in the U.S. and the town of Vincent, Perth, Western Australia, have passed selective purchasing policy against the government of Burma. On 14 Nov, 1998 Vincent becoming the third Australian Council to pass such legislation. The previous two were Marrickville, New South Wales and Moreland, Victoria. In its recommendation, the Council condemned the violent oppression of the rightful elected government of Burma, the system of oppression and the continuing denial of human rights in Burma by the military dictatorship. The Council will not, in certain circumstances, purchase goods or services provided by those who conduct business in or with Burma, or who are willing to do so, until democracy has been restored and human rights violations have ceased.”

In what is being labeled a huge victory for advocates of selective purchasing laws, the Los Angeles City Council voted on 14 December to adopt the Free Burma ordinance, which will prohibit the city from contracting with companies doing business with Burma. The victory for supporters of democracy in Burma comes at a time when selective purchasing agreement opponents looked to gain momentum after the National Foreign Trade Council, a corporate lobby group, sued the state of Massachusetts to force it to revoke its Burma Law. A federal judge ruled that the state’s selective purchasing law targeting Burma violated the federal government’s exclusive rule over foreign affairs. The decision is being appealed. “Without doubt, this ordinance will rejuvenate advocates of selective purchasing in Massachusetts and across the country to use these laws as a tool to promote democracy abroad,” said Simon Billeness, Senior Analyst for Franklin Research and Development Corporation and an expert on socially responsible investing.

“We have the country’s two largest cities - New York and now Los Angeles - saying that we will not give contracts to companies that do business in Burma as long as the brutal junta is in charge.” Twenty-two other U.S. cities and counties have selective purchasing laws that target Burma.

Free Burma Coalition, Australia

The Nation, 14 Dec 1998

Japanese Support for Polio Vaccinations

The Japanese government is donating 61 million yen (458,646 U.S. dollars) worth of oral polio vaccine (OPV) to Burma for its fourth National Immunization Days (NIDs), happening this month and on January 17, 1999. The donation will cover 260,000 vials for 2.6 million children in Burma, according to a press release of the Japanese Embassy in Rangoon. The Japanese government has donated just under 1 million dollars worth of OPV for the immunization program in Burma from 1995 up to the present. Japan also made a one time contribution of $225,563 worth of medical equipment to the country’s National Health Laboratory in 1996. The Japanese government has also sent an expert in polio virology for who surveyed the situation between November 1997 and October of this year.

The National 12 Dec 1998

Bangkok Post 12 Dec 1998


Dry Season Military Buildup

Rangoon is building up troops along the Thai-Burma border in preparation for a dry season military campaign against ethnic insurgent groups according to Thai sources. Twenty to thirty battalions of Burmese troops had been stationed in Burmese territory along the border in Ratchaburi and Maha Song provinces indicating strikes against ethnic armies are imminent. The Thai foreign ministry has asked that Rangoon stop the suppression, which has the potential of intruding into Thai territory. A ministry spokesman, KobSak Chutikul, said that while the suppression of insurgency groups was an internal affair of Burma, Thailand would not allow any armed group into Thai territory. A Burmese envoy was asked to carry Thailand’s concerns about the concentration of troops preparing to move against dissidents. KobSak also indicated that Thailand would provide temporary shelter for those people fleeing the fighting.

Meanwhile, the Thai Immigration Bureau has urged the Labour and Social Welfare Ministry to update it’s figures on the number of illegal workers in the country in preparation for a repatriation campaign. Thailand deported 300,000 of it’s estimated 900,000 mostly Burmese illegal immigrants earlier this year.

The Nation 12 Dec 1998

Bangkok Post 12 Dec 1998

The Nation, 12 Dec 1998
The Last Word
What Others Have to Say About Burma

“No preconditions have been set on the release. After the discussions they came to the understanding that national security is more important than politics.” SPDC spokesman Hla Min denying that NLD members were forced to quit the party

“Cooperation between ethnic groups and the student movement and other pro-democracy groups is essential. Our experience on the border has taught us about ethnic realities in Burma, which the military regime has always distorted.” Burmese student leader at the “Rebuilding a Democratic Burma: Strategies for Sustainable Development” conference, Bellagio, Italy 23-27 March 1998

“The [U.N and World Bank offer of aid in return for opening dialogue with the NLD] will not bring about apocalyptic changes in Burma, nor will it break the political deadlock overnight.” Thailand’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra speaking at a press conference at a seminar on “Engaging Burma in ASEAN” in Manila

“Myanmar has provided a valuable lesson, that you can’t really change a country. Even though ASEAN tries to constructively engage Myanmar, the change has been too slow.” Kao Kim Hourn, director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace think tank.

“Thailand is willing to work with all concerned parties to combat drug trafficking, but without undermining the national integrity of the state of Burma.... This doesn’t mean that we will give recognition or assistance to them in their internal struggle against the Rangoon government” Kobsak Chutikul, Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman, on an offer by Shan and Karenni insurgent groups to cooperate with the Thai army in stemming the flow of illegal drugs into Thailand.

“Asean’s policy of constructive engagement has failed to get things moving in a more democratic direction in Burma. The United States’s consistent and high profile gesture to impose trade and aid sanctions on the military regime in Rangoon have had no obvious effect either. The European Union’s concerted effort to apply its own pressure there has likewise not produced any desirable results. We have used a number of sticks which have apparently not worked. It’s time to give out some carrots.” A participant in the Oct 12-23 informal meeting in England which proposed the possibility of aid to Burma for improvements in political and human rights

“I am here to express a feeling of being together with my friends. That is the feeling I am getting. Unity. Solidarity.” General Khin Nyunt, when asked if he was worried about widening splits in ASEAN between liberal nations and more isolated states such as his own during the recent summit in Hanoi.