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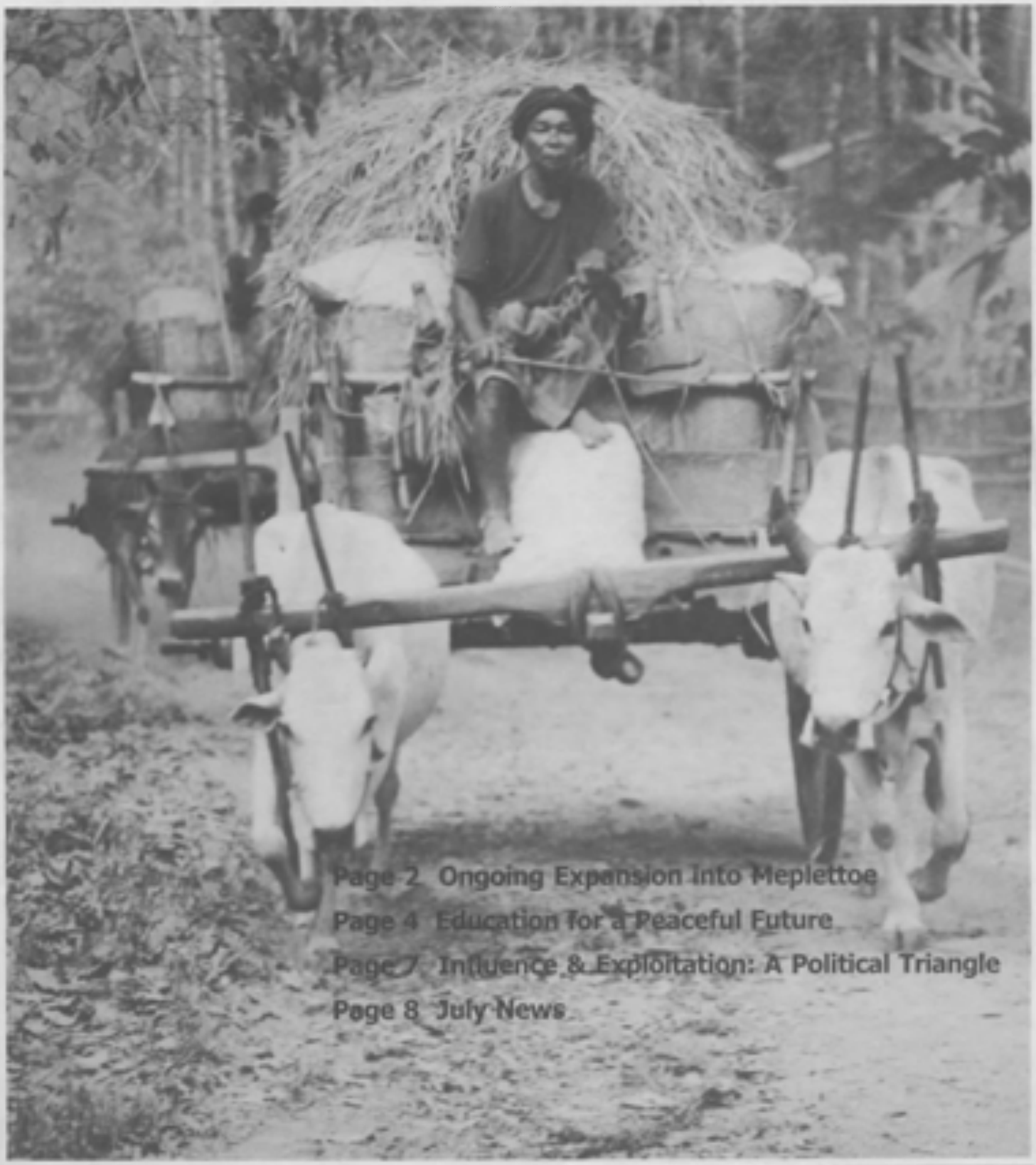

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INFORMATION FOR ACTION CAMPAIGNS FOR PEACE GRASSROOTS EDUCATION AND ORGANIZING

Ongoing Expansion into Meplettoe

The following was extracted from a series of reports from March and June 2000 on the situation in the region surrounding the Meplettoe River in Pa'an district, Karen State. Further military activity in this region, which straddles the Dawna Mountains and is immediately adjacent to the Thai border, is making life even more difficult for the people.

During 1999 and early 2000 the SPDC expanded their activity in the Meppletoe area. Due to the dictatorship's activities, some villages didn't get enough paddy even for their own needs, and furthermore their livestock and household items were raided and taken by soldiers, women were raped and villagers arbitrarily executed. There is a real lack of security in which villagers might be able to earn their livelihoods. Travel and trade are very difficult due to landmines planted by SPDC, Democratic Kayan Buddhist Army (DKBA) and Karen National Liberation Army troops. This environment has seriously eroded trust among villagers.

In the villages throughout the area, SPDC and DKBA troops frequently patrol so only a few remote villages and households are still reasonably secure. Since the beginning of the 1999 rainy season they have been expanding their area of control into the northern part of the region. The dictatorship has moved into this area because there are still teak and other timber resources left in the area. Starting from November 1999 we received news that the SPDC and DKBA had built a road through the area and now day and night the sound of trucks can be heard transporting timber out. Some loads must be sent to Rangoon with the remainder destined for Thailand. When they have entirely stripped the timber from this area then will expand their control again into adjacent areas and it will be impossible to stop them.

Health

Most villages in the East Dawna region have someone who has attended medic's training conducted either by the Karen National Union or the SPDC. These people have a reasonably good understanding of how to cure illnesses. However there are no medicines available for distribution or sale from either the SPDC or other organizations. Only in villages close to towns or the border can individuals go and buy medicines and bring them back to sell. Even in these makeshift shops, sufficient medicines aren't available. Some people are forced to request medicine on credit.

Preparing for rainy season rice in Meplettoe (BI, 2000)

These villagers also don't understand the basic concepts of hygiene and disease prevention. They don't see examples of people maintaining a clean environment. They have only heard the medic in their village or some other health officer tell them over and over that cleanliness is the way to prevent illness and they aren't interested. Consequently, every year there are many unnecessary deaths.

In the past the elders knew how to prepare herbal medicines and treat ill people with them, but now medicinal plants are few. The numbers of people who know how to prepare herbal

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medicines has also decreased. Most Karens continue in the traditional beliefs, so if they are sick they do the same as their ancestors: tying wrists and calling for the person's spirit to return (in accordance with the traditional rituals). Furthermore, if the illness becomes serious they believe that it is due to malevolent spirits. As a result, a lot of people die from preventable illnesses.

Economy/Agriculture

About half of the villagers have their own land and fields. The other half do swidden farming on the mountain sides and do some "pick up" work where they can. As a result of the civil war there are many widows and orphans, who have difficulties supporting themselves. There are no marketplaces in which people can earn a living, only a few ramshackle shops and the remnants of markets. There is no significant trade of any sort.

In terms of agricultural cycles, there are two crops per year, however most of what is grown in the area is consumed locally. Because there are no markets and there are difficulties with travel, people don't see other work options. They only look to sell the high quality coconuts grown in the area, however one of these coconuts can only fetch 20 Kyat.

The people managed to grow a reasonable amount of rice this past year, but since SPDC took control of the area, for the first time farmers have had to sell them 6 baskets of rice per acre of land [as they have now become subject to the goverment's rice acquisition program]. Many villagers still don't have enough to eat and now 10 baskets of paddy will sell for no less than 6000 Kyat.

When the villagers take paddy to the purchasing center to meet the quota it is weighed. If underweight they have to bring the outstanding portion. The SPDC compensates villagers at a rate of 360 Kyat per basket. If the paddy is not good [the seeds are withered] villagers are not given any money but aren't allowed to take it back with them either. The villagers who cannot give the full amount of paddy must give the remainder in cash at the rate of 600 Kyat per basket. The market rate for paddy in this area is 800 Kyat per basket.

This information collector reports that there a small armed group has begun operating in one area of Meplettoe under the authority of Karen State PDC.

The "Storm Unit" is an armed group of 14 men, mostly ex-People's Militia (*Pyithu Sit*) soldiers, deserters and robbers. The Storm Unit goes to villages and demands "goodwill" paddy in the name of Karen State. They are making their demands from three townships in the Meplettoe area and if they don't get it they instruct SPDC and DKBA troops to come and harass the villagers and then take the paddy. Already this unit has taken 27,700 baskets of paddy from 10 villages without giving any compensation.

Not many villagers are raising additional food, either to eat themselves or sell. This is because they are worried that if SPDC or DKBA troops arrive then they will eat it all anyway. If they breed pigs, chickens and goats then they are able to sell only a few and the dictatorship's troops eat the majority.

Military Harassment

However, there is still resistance to the petty harassment of the Burma army among the village people of Meplettoe. In the 1999 rainy season SPDC Light Infantry Battalion 356 lost two of their bulls. They came to talk with the local village head in, accused his villagers of the theft and demanded they compensate the cost of the bulls. For the village elders, this was entirely unjust, and they wouldn't give in to the demands. Courageously and in unity they told the SPDC troops: "We don't know anything about your lost cattle. We don't know who stole them. It is not only people from our village who could have stolen them. Your own soldiers could have stolen them, Thai villagers could have stolen them, the KNU could have stolen them. Show some proof to back up your accusation that it was our villagers." The SPDC officer couldn't produce any evidence, so the village elders went on, "If you force us to pay, we won't pay. If you want the cash, you have to make the Thais give some, you put in some yourselves, and we'll put in some too." The officer listened to what the villagers had to say, then thought about it a moment before replying, "If that's so, you can go back

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Education for a Peaceful Future

Burma Issues has been involved during the last four years in assisting a group of people, now living as refugees in Thailand, to develop their education system.

Tham Hin refugee camp nestles in the bamboo laden hills of Ratchaburi Province, Thailand. It is a "temporary shelter" to almost 9,000 Karen refugees who were driven from their homes. One Sunday afternoon in mid-February 1997 while watching their children play soccer, they were told the Burma Army was about to attack their villages. Grabbing their belongings and fleeing through the dense jungle, these residents of Mergui/Tavoy district began an journey that will permanently affect their lives.

The Karen people have lived in the mountains straddling Burma and Thailand for centuries. During that time they have developed a way of life they are determined to protect as they try to adapt to a quickly changing world. The Karens believe in education and see it as an important way of preserving and enhancing their culture. In the last few years some Karens have grown dissatisfied with what they saw as an antiquated system which was not preparing their children to live in a new world. The Karens have fought a civil war with the Burmese dictatorship for 50 years. They are weary of conflict and want to work toward democracy. Part of their dissatisfaction comes from a belief that the school system was not producing citizens who could find solutions to the problems of the conflict.

Among the villagers who fled in 1997 were 12 educators who had completed a paper outlining a new educational strategy the previous month. The year before they had received permission from the governor of the Karen National Union administrative district to begin planning for change. They had spent much time surveying many villagers about the needs of the education system. Based on this research they wrote a paper outlining a new vision.

This paper stated a mission to produce tenth standard graduates who "are able to find a true and lasting peace in Burma." Towards that end their goals are: students who can think critically and creatively, who are leaders, who are good community members, and who are proud Karens. After settling in Tham Hin refuge camp in Thailand, these educators sent word that they were ready to begin the education reform as proposed.

They had originally organized their proposed system into six areas; governance, roles, assessment, community/parents, curriculum and instruction. Beginning in early 1998, each part of their system was assigned to a team within the camp. Using a process of reflection, planning and action, the educators of Tham Hin have accomplished much positive change over the past three years.

The work of the Assessment Team was first reflected in negotiating for a school. Originally children were taught sitting in row after row of church pews separated only by battered chalk boards. The children were unable to concentrate, the teachers became exhausted from talking loud enough to be heard. Now they have 34 rooms in 6 main buildings and four other small one-room buildings in addition to a library, office and storage area. Many classrooms have cement floors which are covered with plastic mats during the school day. Children sit at low moveable tables which promote small group work, and flexible seating for studying and using learning centers.

The children once recited what the teacher read to them from a booklet first printed in 1904. Resources were used at random, if at all. Teachers had no basis on which to make decisions about what to teach. Often an old

textbook became the curriculum. The curriculum did not match child development, and thus was causing problems reflected in a very high failure rate in each standard (grade level) and a 97% drop-out rate. There were 10 year olds still in Kindergarten! It is not surprising that many children just gave up and quit school.

Through a process of examining various curriculum and selecting what they wanted, the Curriculum Team first published a draft and then a revised edition of their own curriculum for use during the next few years. Now teachers plan lessons based on a scope and sequence, developed and revised by these educators. Their lessons use a variety of instructional methods and are based on concrete activities, experiences and the use of materials at hand. Science, Health, Physical Education and the Arts have been added to the existing Math, Karen, English and Social Studies curriculum. All curriculum builds on the Karen culture. The Arts curriculum in particular uses the magnificent talents and resources of people in the camp. All topics use as many commonly available materials as possible and draw on any resources the teachers can find. Additionally, the Curriculum Team now understands the process of selecting curriculum and, therefore, can keep it up to date.

The Instructional Team is also seeing positive changes in the teaching. Teachers are creative and enthusiastic, and use the library to research the themes that they teach. They have many positive comments about this method. "We all work together and share, " said one educator. Others said "I love thinking of all of the activities," and "research is fun." Positive changes are also heard in the language the teachers use about their students, in the ways they discipline the children and in the numbers of children passing on to the next standard at the end of the year. Children actively participate in their learning and also have positive things to say about the changes. "School is good," and "we learned so many things!" they said. One very young student refused to move on to kindergarten "because [her pre-school Parent Play Group] was so much fun!"

Teachers have donated many hours and weeks over the past three years training for this type of teaching. Now some of these teachers are also trainers. These teachers offered two of the three trainings this year to a class of 30, which included new teachers, teachers who had missed earlier sessions, and several current high school students who are preparing for future careers. It is the Instruction Team who made the many arrangements for these trainings, including one session held inside Burma at great risk to the instructor.

Now many people from the camp, including many teachers, have been trained to facilitate education change/reform for the future. Trainers are ready to offer this instruction to other camps and inside Burma when it is possible to do so. Their training is based on what they have experienced at Tham Hin. They said, "I never knew we could do all this ourselves. Now I can help my people wherever I am."

The other teams have consistently provided support. The Parents/Community Team has volunteered many hours making equipment, raising buildings, providing special lessons and visiting the classrooms. The Roles Team acted quickly to provide descriptions of what is expected of parents, students and teachers. Finally, the Governance Team spent many hours discussing, planning and implementing new ideas and policies which are meant to improve the school system. They have always sought input from others. This team has also struggled with how to create a democratic school system in a refugee camp where so many basic human rights are absent. This team is also working to create an evaluation system that will be just and fair as well as accurately assess what the children are learning so further changes can easily be incorporated by teachers.

Participants in a teacher training course (BI, 2000)

Already the results of all these changes are being seen. More children now begin studying at an earlier age and the dropout rate has shown positive change. Most of the children are passing each year. Special needs children are receiving more attention in the classrooms.

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now." Since then the villagers haven't heard anything more of this matter.

On the evening of the 21st of June, SPDC Troop Column 2 under the command of Maj. Thet Naung, was to journey to from one village to a neighboring one in north-central Meplettoe. They didn't dare travel alone and so detained nine female and three male villagers to go with them. When they had gone over a kilometer from the village, KNU troops assaulted them with two mines [claymore style, triggered by a wire and spraying shot] causing nine to be injured and one to be killed instantly. In retaliation SPDC troops immediately shot and killed a 48 year old female villager on the side of the path 75 paces from where the mines were triggered and took the earrings from her body.

After the battle the SPDC troops immediately returned to the village from which they had come. Pointing their guns at house occupants they ordered them outside, after which they went into the houses and took clothes, food and anything else they wanted. Things that they didn't want or couldn't eat they smashed up and threw on to the ground outside. Many households where the women make their living selling food, cakes, slippers and other goods lost everything. On this occasion the SPDC troops looted the entire village. However, there are three monks at the village, and when they saw what was happening they came forth and each sat inside one house. The houses that the monks sat in were not ransacked like the others. By my best estimate, the village lost around 3 million kyats worth of food and property.

After the troops had left we went to visit the villagers. Some said that, "We have no food," others, "I have no pots to cook rice in," still others, "I have no lengyi to wear" – they all face difficulty. We couldn't say anything to them in reply. The only thing that could be said was that this is what we have come to expect of the soldiers and it is what they will always do. Who can stop them. We need to be unified and help each other. If we don't help each other, nobody will come and help us. Those who have must help those who do not.

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Is the system perfect? No. It's hard to convince students to complete all the standards when there is limited possibility to pursue a career. They are not allowed out of the camp for employment or further education. These students have many gifts, and some are involved in serving their people in the camp. One small group of graduates has taken over the school library, learning the system quickly and maintaining it effectively. Others have become translators and labor over Karen/English materials to help others. Some are getting ready to be community workers. Another group of graduates are taking distance education courses. Still others have taken the teacher training and will assist current teachers, or begin teaching themselves this coming year.

However, this only represents a few compared to the number of students who would be anxious to graduate if there was the freedom to pursue the careers available to students in democratic countries. For men, the lure of adventure outside the camp as fishermen or soldiers is irresistible. And yet the new curriculum is gradually working its way to tenth standard. When it is implemented across all classrooms and across all standards, many more students will stay in school because their learning will be relevant and exciting.

The education system in the camp is really quite excellent. The students are being prepared to find a true and lasting peace in Burma. They are learning to think critically and creatively as leaders, community members and proud Karens.

Positive change, yes, but positive change for what? Opportunities for refugees remain limited. This remains the major obstacle. And the answers to this question will not be fully known until there is peace and freedom to fully explore all the possible options and opportunities.

Mavis Oleson

INFLUENCE & EXPLOITATION: A POLITICAL TRIANGLE

The rumors of Sen. Gen. Than Shwe's poor health and imminent retirement have been the talk of both diplomatic and activist circles. Speculation and prediction about the rivalry and potential infighting between the junta's second and third ranked members, armed forces commander Gen. Maung Aye and military intelligence chief Lt-Gen. Khin Nyunt, have naturally followed. More than a few eyebrows were raised when the army chief led an official delegation to Beijing during the first week of June to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic relations, without Khin Nyunt. The military intelligence head is credited with the currently strong Sino-Burmese ties while the hard-line Maung Aye has been wary of over-dependence on China. Less surprising, but no less noteworthy, was Khin Nyunt's July 3rd visit to Pakistan and a simultaneous visit to Rangoon by Indian army head Gen. Ved Prakash Malik at Maung Aye's invitation. What these activities spell for the future of the SPDC leadership and for Burma is still unclear. However these diplomatic forays have clearly demonstrated the strong shift in the policy of India, which is rushing into stronger economic and military ties with Burma. In the excitement of seeing potential cracks in the facade of strength put forth by Burma's junta, it is sometimes easy to ignore some of the more complex daily economic and political realities that are effecting the country. India's policy shift towards Burma is one such reality that needs attention.

India is always keenly aware of China's activities and through the early 1990s tended to see Burma as a satellite state of it's giant northern neighbor. Initially India attempted to neutralize this influence through support to the Burmese democratic opposition, but the military government only tightened its grip on power and strengthened its relationship with China. India was especially threatened by military assistance from China to develop bases on the Coco Island's that could monitor nuclear tests in their adjacent territorial waters and potentially serve to support a naval presence in the Andaman sea. "Till now China has been a land neighbor but through Burma it may soon become our maritime neighbor," said one Indian naval officer, expressing these concerns. [1]

The two visits by Gen. Ved Prakash Malik over the last six months, have revealed a new approach towards neutralizing the Chinese presence and increasing Inidan influence in Burma. While many details of the agreements between the two countries have been kept quiet, the Indian government acknowledged that it is lending "non-military" support to Burma in the form of boots, uniforms and leased helicopters.[2] Additionally, the two countries have agreed to cooperate in curbing insurgent groups which operate along their mutual border. The Indians are concerned with Naga insurgents who have used Burma as a safe base of operations and Burma is concerned about Chin and other ethnic insurgents who have used Indian territory for similar purposes. This shift was seen in India to be the only pragmatic alternative. "While our hearts are with the pro-democracy movement, we can't wait for them to come to power," said one overseas Indian diplomat.

India is notably also seeking closer economic cooperation with Burma. Bombay businessman G.L. Goenka led a trade delegation to Burma in June to discuss economic cooperation between the two countries. There are currently several large projects being discussed. Indian companies are looking at copper mining along the Burma-India border and building a natural gas pipeline. The government in New Dehli has confirmed that they are in the late stages of talks to build a 1,000 megawatt hydropower plant on the Chindwin River to supply both countries with electricity.[3]

Much of this shift of support has been done in the name of exploiting the Khin Nyunt/Maung Aye rivalry with India strongly behind the hard-line army commander as the future leader of the SPDC. Burma's success in playing China and India off each other, however, calls for an evaluation as to who is exploiting whom. While the results of the junta leadership struggle will have major implications for the future of Burma, the economic projects and military cooperation between Burma and India will continue to have very concrete ramifications for the people of western Burma that cannot be overlooked.

E. Miller

1 Rahul Bedi, "India trying hard to build military ties with Burma," The Asian Age, 7 July 2000

2 "India reaps economic benefits," Far East Economic Review, 29 June 2000

3 ibid

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Joint military exercises. The Democratic Voice of Burma reported that China was planning joint military exercises with forces from Hmawbi and Tenasserim air bases and Tenasserim naval base. These exercises were to be held in July and August of this year. Light infantry battalions and divisions were also set to take part in the exercises to be held in Mergui and Tavoy districts of Tenasserim Division. Village Peace and Development Councils in the districts were ordered to provide 50 volunteers per village to help build housing for the troops involved in the exercises.

"Burma, China to hold joint military exercises in July, August in coastal region," Democratic Voice of Burma, 30 June 2000

Population statistics. Burma's Ministry of Immigration and Population reported that the countries population is currently 50.13 million and is growing by 2.02 percent a year. Minister U Saw Tun said that the growth was welcome as only 23 million of the 45 million cultivatable acres in Burma were under cultivation, and food scarcity was not an issue. U Saw Tun said that the population density stood at 74 people per square kilometer.

"Myanmar says population passes 50 million," Reuters, 12 July 2000

Yetagun gasfield. Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) president Prasert Bunsumpan said that his company was discussing a joint venture with Malaysia's Petronas to build a gas separation plant in Burma. The plant would produce liguified gas from natural gas from the Yetagun gasfield.

The Mitsubishi company announced that it planned to buy as much as 40% of the condensate petroleum from the Yetagun project. The development of the gas-field is being undertaken by Premier, Petronas, Nipon Mitsubishi Oil Corp and PTT. The project should begin production at the end of July and is expected to yield 200 million cubic feet a day of natural gas and 6,500 barrels a day of condensate.

"Thai PTT in JV talks with Petronas," Reuters, 12 July 2000

"Mitsubishi to buy condensate from Myanmar gas project," Dow Jones, 11 July 2000

UWSA-SSA conflict. Troops from the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Shan State Army – South (SSA-South) have been preparing for conflict following an order to the Wa group from Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council to upgrade a road extending into SSA-South territory. The SPDC has a cease-fire agreement with the UWSA while the SSA-South is one of the few groups to continue fighting the military government. The move is widely seen as a strategy to encourage conflict between the two groups and weaken the SSA resistance. The USWA is renowned as a fighting force and is estimated to outnumber the SSA-South 10 to 1. Thai armed forces were sent to the area of conflict, opposite Chiang Mai province in Thailand, but nothing had happened by July 16th as both armies have been suffering from a malaria epidemic.

"Thai troops on alert as Myanmar ethnic armies prepare to fight," Agence France Press, 13 July 2000

"Myanmar ethnic armies lay down weapons to battle disease: source," Agence France Press, 16 July 2000

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