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The Other Side: Putting the Chin back into focus

Joining the CNF

During the uprising in 1988, university students left Rangoon and went back to the places were they came from. Many Chin students came back to Matupi, and all the students from the Matupi schools joined this group of university students and protested against the government. They told us about how we must change the government. The catholic father who was my teacher did not want me to join this group, he wanted me to finish my studies as I would have graduated in only eight days from high school. After some time, I also joined the demonstrations. On September 18, when the SLORC took power, some Chin student leaders were arrested, and the rest of us fled to India in Mizoram. In Mizoram, the Indian government responded by opening the Champhai district refugee camp, which housed around 1,000 students. The conditions in the camp were good. At this time, we were called the Burma Student Democratic Front (BSDF). Then later that year, a leader came and most of the Chin students joined the Chin National Front, or CNF.

The CNF is mostly based along the Burmese border and does not have a cease-fire agreement with the SPDC. The CNF is still fighting to restore democracy in Burma and self-determination for the Chin people. Three times a Chin pastor sent from Khin Nyunt in Rangoon, came to the CNF and asked us to enter peace talks. The CNF did not accept the SPDC offers, however, because the SPDC would not grant the CNF any political activity. Political power is very important, because without it we cannot make decisions for ourselves.

Changes in Chin State

He spent almost ten years working for the CNF in Mizoram. Then in 1997, he went to New Delhi, to work on contacting Indian NGOs that would be interested in helping support human rights training. Six months later, after he was trained in human rights documentation, he came back to Burma, and was a human rights information collector for two years. After being gone ten years, he learned that the Burma of today was very different from before the uprising.

All of Chinland is controlled by the SPDC. The SPDC did not start development in the Chin state in 1988, because the SPDC thought, ‘if we give Chinland development, the armed groups will just take it away from us.’ Before 1988, education was not so bad and...
it was free. Now the SPDC controls our schools, and does not pay the teachers enough, so teachers charge tuition for a special extra class after school. The special class is not mandatory, but if the students do not attend the extra class, they will not pass. Many times the tuition can cost 700 kyats for one month, which is very expensive for many families. There is no university or college in Chin State, and there are only a few high schools provided by the government. In remote areas of Chin State, many villagers do not have government schools. They Chin in these areas are very poor, so they cannot send their children to urban areas. These poor communities collect money together, and get help from Christian churches, and set up a private middle school. In 1998, however, the SPDC ordered the communities to close down schools that were not affiliated with the government.

SPDC soldiers steal regularly from villages. Many times they enter a village, and call a meeting. Everyone must come to the meeting, where an officer talks about the SPDC, how they are trying to build the country for progress, and how they wish to help the Chin State. At the same time, soldiers go into the homes and take food, plates, ... whatever they need. The Chin know what is happening, but feel there is nothing they can do. Most SPDC soldiers do not get full payment, because many times they must pay a tribute to their leader, who says the money will go to build a pagoda, making calendars, etc. The pagoda is built, but many times the leader keeps a portion of the money for himself. So soldiers will take what they can from the villages and try to sell it in the capital for a good price.

Many Chin, and especially fathers, have fled to India, mostly for economic reasons to find work to support their wife and children back in the Chin state. There is very little work in the Chin state at any level besides farming. With the little work that there is, you could make about 150 kyats a day. In India, non-skilled workers could make more than 100 rupees (700 kyats) and send the money back to their families.

Human Rights Documentation

He learned various reasons why human rights documentation is much more difficult in practice than it can be in theory.

When I would enter a community, villagers would learn about their rights, how to document violations, and then they would send them to me on the outside. I would teach them to write down what happened, or how much the soldiers took, or how many villagers were taken for forced labor, etc. We would then send the information we had to human rights organizations such as Images Asia and the CHRO (Chin Human Rights Organization). They would then send the information to the rest of the world.

But communication is very difficult. Sometimes reports would get to me very late, maybe three weeks or a month after the incident had occurred. Information would be sent by people traveling, many times by others working with the CNF. Late information is not as useful, and harder to use effectively.

One of the hardest parts is that when I went into the villages, people were scared. They were not afraid of me, but they continue to be afraid of the SPDC. They think that if the SPDC knows they are talking, they will be tortured. Many people do not want to send information for the same reason, for fear that the SPDC will catch them. I had to explain to the people, how necessary it is to talk about what the government does. If the government is good, people should be happy. But if the government is bad, people must talk about it. And they know that this [reporting] will help us.

Many people do not know what their rights are, because they think that whatever the SPDC says, villagers think the military has a right to do it. If they know their rights clearly, it is not difficult to collect the information.

Many times the information we get is not complete, and very general. Many times there are few facts, no numbers, no details. It is very hard to use this information. Many times, for people who are there, it is very hard to know what people on the outside want to hear.

The Future of Chin State

The future is not very good for the Chin State. In some places people are struggling to grow rice. If the SPDC still holds the power, it will be worse than before. Now they create more problems, because in many places, be-
How are human rights examined within Burma?

A survey of the publications produced by the various opposition groups can reveal a great deal. It not only reflects what issues they deem important, but also portrays a picture of the situation in Burma to the international community. In the broadest terms publications can be divided into four groups.

Most organizations representing ethnic groups publish newsletters. The Shan Human Rights Foundation, The Chin Human Rights Organization, The Mon Forum, and the Karen Human Rights Group all produce newsletters. They naturally focus on those particular aspects of human rights abuses relevant to each group. These newsletters tend to depict abuses occurring as a result of the on-going civil war, such as executions, rapes, forced labor, and forced relocation. The groups with significant religious minority populations (such as the Chin, Karen and Rohingya) also report on religious discrimination. In general, these human rights abuses could be called 'visible.' Despite the inherent difficulties, field workers can enter into Burma and document, interview, and even film such abuses. Often these newsletters note the time, place and who was involved in such abuses. There are 'victims' and 'perpetrators.' It is a 'legalistic' approach, documenting abuses for some future trial where perpetrators will hopefully meet with some justice. There is little analysis of why these events are occurring.

The mainstream political opposition groups tend to largely focus on the NLD and specifically on Aung San Suu Kyi. The ABSDF has put out newsletters such as the Voice of the Poaock and Dawk while groups such as the NLD, the NCGUB and the NCUB tend to distribute information, statements and specific reports through the media and over the internet. Typically the focus here is on the lack of democracy and political freedom in Burma. Freedom of expression, the corruption of the judicial system, censorship of the media and political parties, arrests, and the torture of political prisoners are among the issues addressed. In some ways these realities are 'less visible.' To visit Rangoon for example, one does not 'see' these things, merely the consequences. But there is an easily identifiable focus, especially for the international community - Aung San Suu Kyi. Her ongoing persecution is a clear signal that political freedoms have not come to Burma. Through her actions, such as the recent attempts by her to travel about the country, she can dramatically focus international attention on Burma. It is quite likely that her recent moves have been designed to attract attention ahead of significant meetings by the ILO and European Union. But rather than use the attention to discuss forced labor and the ILO, supporters have focused on the persecution of Aung San Suu Kyi herself. With so many disparate groups and with so many specific agendas, a cohesive strategy is noticeably absent.

Publications in a third category focus on specific issues relevant to Burma. To cite just a few: the Landmine Monitor has recently released a report on the critical situation of landmines in Burma. The Food Tribunal has linked the right to food with militarization. A recent Earthrights report examines the human rights repercussion of the Yetagun and Yadana gas pipelines. The ILO has extensive documentation on the use of forced labor, and Amnesty International typically breaks their analysis of the situation down, state by state. Included within this broad category are the numerous publications and organizations that focus on specific topics. There are groups that concentrate on women's rights (for example the Burmese Women's Union and the Shan Women's Action Network), the environment (Karenni Evergreen), Internally Displaced Persons (such as the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People), and so on. These groups have a specialized focus, and obviously report on their chosen issue. They are not usually intended to be comprehensive examinations of the situation for Burma.

A fourth category can be seen in publications such as The Irrawaddy, Burma Debate & Human Rights Solidarity by the Asian Human Rights Commission. These are well produced, more comprehensive magazine type publications. They tend towards more detailed analysis, and can often include academic articles, personal stories, international actions taking place, and summaries of recent news events. They can include pieces from many different sources and do a great deal towards providing a comprehensive overview of Burma.

It should be noted that the publications listed are not intended to be comprehensive, but more an indication of material available and their content. However, what can be concluded very quickly from this brief depiction, is that Burma is not a homogenous country. Each area, ethnic group or social group has a different experience of life within Burma. The situation for civil servants in Rangoon and Mandalay is markedly different to that for a peasant within the delta struggling to meet his paddy quota. And the situation for an ethnic farmer in a free-fire zone is differ-
The reporting of human rights reflects this diversity. Each focus is important and needed. Local realities for each group necessitate a distinct focus. There is no civil war or laying of mines within the Delta. And in the ‘free-fire zones’ where life itself is threatened, there is no immediate concern over issues of political democracy. All are legitimate concerns. But it would seem clear that the way in which human rights are seen reflects the deeper gulf between ethnic groups and the fact that there is little dialogue between them. In fact the way that different groups look at human rights often reflects the underlying problems faced by Burma. It is segmented and fractured, often along ethnic lines, with each group failing to see the significance of what the other is saying. Furthermore, if policy is determined by the information that you have, and that information is only partial, then this can create obvious problems. That rapes, murders and war in the border areas are largely overlooked in some publications is a deficiency. That issues of political freedom and the problems of Delta peasants are overlooked in other newsletters is equally shortsighted.

One goal common to most of the publications is to attempt to influence the international community. When analysis is made the language is strong, attempting to link the Burma experience to other world situations such as Bosnia, or now East Timor. ‘Ethnic cleansing,’ ‘systematic abuses’ and others terms are evocative and designed to describe a very serious situation. It is hoped that information can jolt the international community into some form of action. But the diversity of the problems in Burma can also lead to some confusion amongst the international community. Some feedback from Thai and European diplomats going into Burma has suggested some contradictions. They report seeing no evidence of forced relocation, war or summary executions on their visits to Rangoon or Mandalay. From the reports that they had read, this was what they had been led to believe was rampant throughout Burma. They therefore concluded that the human rights situation in Burma was not nearly as bad as had been reported. It is clearly a mistake made in ignorance, but significant nonetheless. They were simply looking in the wrong places, and for the wrong types of abuses. This naivete can be found in a Bangkok Post article discussing the possibility of “opening a land route for leisure travelers linking Bangkok and Rangoon.”

The writer was confused as to why this was not possible. The only mention of the ethnic civil war came in the glib statement that “the odd freedom fighter takes a potshot at anyone passing by.” This writer had obviously not been reading some of the Karen publications detailing the horrors of the on-going civil war.

Each publication is obviously important. To paint a comprehensive picture of the human rights situation for all of Burma would be extremely difficult, but each paints only part of the picture. If each group continues to document and analyze only part of the situation within Burma, and only in selected areas, then the solutions that are put forward will continue to be relevant to only parts of the population. As mentioned, some publications do attempt to include pieces of concern from a variety of sources and groups. Without such linkages between the organizations and publications, the gulfs that exist, particularly between the ethnic groups and the Burman student groups, will continue to underpin and deepen the problems in Burma.

J. Schnookal

END NOTES
2. Total Denial Continues, Earthrights Int., May 2000

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cause the Chin cannot work freely. As the SPDC forces villagers every year to work in construction, to work as porters, people cannot live free lives.

Much time and attention has been invested in understanding the plight of the Karen, the Karenni and The Shan from the Thai side of the border. People concerned with Burma cannot assume, however, that Burma’s problems can be dealt with by only examining and working with a few pieces of the whole puzzle. As the interview reveals, more important than guns shooting in Burma is the underlying anger, pain, and lack of trust between groups, which must be constructively engaged. These problems must be addressed before any possibility of true reconciliation between Burma’s many peoples can be reached.
**POWER STRUGGLE? MAUNG AYE AND KHIN NYUNT**

“A ruling military is not a monolithic, far-sighted, clever creature. It is like a political party, albeit armed and uniformed. As such, military players are, like politicians and political czars, moved by power considerations. And as we all well know power divides.” — Chao-Tzang Yawnghwe

Political forecasting is an uncertain art at best. In Burma, where reliable information is a rare commodity, good political analysis faces serious obstacles. Consequently, rumor mongering and trite conclusions have characterized much of the political speculation in the country. This has especially been the case with the “conflict” between SPDC vice-chairman Gen. Maung Aye and SPDC Sec. 1 Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt. Speculation about problems between the junta’s number two and three men has grown steadily amid recent rumors that Sen. Gen. Than Shwe is preparing to vacate the SPDC’s top spot.

Confusing as the workings of Burma’s military are, different reports on Burmese politics often produce contrary caricatures of the military leaders. Intelligence services head Khin Nyunt is seen alternately as a progressive and “the prince of dark-world.” Army commander Maung Aye is labeled hard-liner by some and moderate by others. As easy as it is to latch onto these caricatures, the personalities that dominate Burmese politics deserve deeper evaluation.

Khin Nyunt has a Bachelors degree in Psychology and graduated from the Officers Training School in 1960. That year he became commander of Infantry Battalion No. 20. However, he has spent most of his career in desk jobs. During the 1970s he served as a staff officer at the Defense Ministry’s Bureau of Special Operations and in 1982 became the tactical operations commander of the 44th Light Infantry Division. After being appointed to intelligence he was instrumental, together with Ne Win’s daughter Sanda Win, in suppressing the activity of pro-democracy groups and bringing the rioting under control.

After an incident in which 2 North Korean military officers killed 4 South Korean cabinet ministers and 17 others in a bomb attack in Rangoon in 1983, Khin Nyunt was appointed as the head of intelligence. The former Military Intelligence Service (MIS) chief Tin Oo had been “permitted to step down” just before the incident because of the threatening level of influence his intelligence organization wielded. After Tin Oo left, intelligence suffered and Khin Nyunt was brought in as a strong leader to revive the MIS. It wasn’t long before Khin Nyunt’s “Directorate of Defense Services Intelligence (DDSI),” became almost as efficient as the old outfit.

The SPDC Sec-1 has moved to make his intelligence units as independent from the military structure as possible. He has set up a second office for the DDSI outside of Defense Ministry headquarters and since 1992 intelligence officers outside Rangoon have been able to report directly to central command instead of going through regional military commanders. Additionally, Khin Nyunt has created smaller intelligence bodies that report directly to him. These include the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS), which has been dominant in recent political changes, particularly the 1997 political restructuring. Naturally, this has raised concern among military commanders.

The most outward looking member of the junta, Khin Nyunt is known for being more flexible in his methods that some other top military men. Information, psychology and negotiation have been his tools of choice. All but one of the highly publicized cease-fires and peace agreements with insurgent groups were devised by Khin Nyunt and he has held several talks with Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the NLD. The SPDC Secretary 1 has also been much quicker to seek outside assistance to tackle some of the problems in the country, including UN and US money, obtained ostensibly to tackle the country’s drug problems. As the head of the Border Areas Development Program (BADP), Khin Nyunt has also exercised control over ethnic groups through development programs. Khin Nyunt’s well-noted tendency towards negotiation, however, doesn’t indicate a lack of brutality. Observers in Karen State have reported new intelligence units roaming the countryside harassing, raping and killing family members and friends of ethnic soldiers. Khin Nyunt has used all these methods effectively to keep Burma firmly under military control.

Lt. Gen Khin Nyunt has maintained a very high profile, compared to the other members of the junta. Burma’s official press carries the details of so many of his activities throughout the country it appears as if he is virtually omnipresent. As SPDC’s man in charge of international relations, he is the person most likely to grace the pages of international newspapers and to give interviews. As the engineer of Burma’s close relationship with China and as a proponent of Burma’s membership in ASEAN, Khin Nyunt has been a frequent guest in Beijing and has traveled extensively in the region to build relationships with potential allies. Unlike other military fig-
ures, Khin Nyunt seems to use, and even enjoy his time in the limelight.

By contrast, little is known about Gen. Maung Aye. One of the few things that the army commander shares with Khin Nyunt is the experience of commanding an Infantry Battalion early in his time in the military. Otherwise the two men have had quite different careers. From 1979 to 1993 Maung Aye held the role of regional commander, first in the Northeastern Region and later in the Eastern Region of the country. In Burma, the regional commands are highly independent with much decision-making latitude in their respective areas. During his time in Shan State as Eastern Region commander, Maung Aye cultivated relationships with businessmen and other influential people in the region. These connections fostered a cease-fire agreement between the army commander and the Chinese/Shan drug lord Khun Sa, a move that angered many western countries but that ended much of the influence of Khun Sa’s powerful Mong Tai Army.

Maung Aye was called to Rangoon in 1993 to become Deputy Commander in Chief of the Defense Services and a year later was named Vice-Chairman of the SLORC, a position he continues to hold as part of the SPDC. All indications are that the army chief prefers strict controls and force to keep the country in line and to put neighboring countries in their place. One of the places where we can see Maug Aye’s hand most clearly is in trade issues, as he sits at the head of the policymaking government coordinating committee on trade. The trade balance is controlled through import and export bans on certain products and through rigid control over border crossings. In 1997 it was decided that Burma was becoming too dependent on China and the border crossing was closed there for many months. Not long after the re-opening of the Chinese border, Maung Aye, displeased with how the siege of the Burmese embassy in Bangkok was resolved by Thai authorities, decided to close all border checkpoints with Thailand. This occurred despite earlier promises from Khin Nyunt to the Thai government that checkpoints would be closed only when there was fighting in the vicinity.

Due to power concerns within the military hierarchy, Burmese politics have taken on a certain cyclical character. Over the past six years news reports have forecast the waning power and position of Khin Nyunt and the rise of Maung Aye, followed a short time later by a complete reversal. In March 1997, a Far Eastern Economic review report stated that “judging from recent developments, Khin Nyunt is on the losing side” of his ongoing power struggle with the army head. In July of the same year, an article from the Bangkok based “The Nation” news-paper claimed that things were looking up for Khin Nyunt as his “rivals had been outflanked” by his handling of a bomb attack at rival SLORC Secretary 2, Tin Oo’s house. Then following the transition from SLORC to SPDC in November of 1997, the Far East Economic Review reported the statement that the “SPDC’s strongman is, in fact, Khin Nyunt.” These sudden shifts in the news are as much a factor of the back and forth over approaches to running the country as they are of the lack of good information.

Now Maung Aye has yet again risen to the top. His visit to China to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic relations early this year without Khin Nyunt, caused waves among Burma watchers. The past year has also seen Maung Aye forging close ties with the Indian military (see “Influence and Exploitation: A Political Triangle,” Burma Issues, July 2000). These factors along with reports that the military commander-in-chief has asked the United Wa State Army cease-fire group to report directly to him instead of Khin Nyunt indicates that Maung Aye is stepping up to take over control of the junta.

It is sometimes easy to forget that despite this highly publicized conflict, the ultimate goals of both Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt are the same. The label’s “progressive” and “hardliner” have limited meaning in Burma. The political party metaphor applies here. It is in the individual interest of both men to maintain the military’s power over the country and they are both prepared to take what steps necessary to insure that outcome. Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt have decidedly different backgrounds which lead to very different ideas about which problems are of highest priority and what methodology should be used to deal with those problems, but the same ultimate goal.
UN human rights rapporteur on Burma resigns. The United Nation’s special human rights rapporteur on Burma, Rajsoomer Lallah, has resigned. Mr Lallah said that he lacked the logistical and administrative support that he needed from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, but that funding difficulties may have been one reason for the lack of support. Mr Lallah said he was disappointed at the lack of progress during his mandate. Earlier this month, he helped produce a UN report accusing the military government of severe human rights abuses. He has been in the post for four years, but has never been allowed by Burma’s military regime to visit the country. His predecessor had also stepped down, citing similar grievances.

"UN human rights rapporteur resigns," Nov 3. BBC
"UN special rapporteur on Myanmar resigns citing lack of support," Nov 3. AFP
"UN rapporteur on Burma resigns," Nov 4. BBC
"Exasperated UN observer leaves big shoes to fill," Nov 6. South China Morning Post

Foreign investment in Burma surges in 2000. According to the latest official data, foreign investment for the first three months of the year of the 2000-2001 fiscal year, beginning April, has overtaken the two previous fiscal years with 64.133 million U.S. dollars. The country drew only 29.455 million and 55.61 million dollars during the same period in 1998-99 and 1999-2000. The increase in foreign investment is largely attributed to increased investment in the oil and gas sector with US$47.55 million and that in the manufacturing sector with $15.871 million. South Korea, Canada and Malaysia injected the largest investment in the three-month period with 30.21 million, 21.45 million and 9.832 million dollars respectively.


Korean company to supply electricity to Burma. The Seoul-based LG Industrial Systems Co says it has signed a deal with the state-owned Myanmar Electric Power Enterprise to supply high-voltage equipment and switchboards to the country. The value of the equipment, according to LG Industrial sources, would be US$3.5 million. The products will be used for the construction of substations in central Burma in May next year.


Gen Maung Aye visits India. The vice-chairman of the SPDC, arrived in India on Tuesday with an entourage of six senior ministers. Arrival of this high-powered delegation is an indication of how far relations between India and the military regime have progressed since a conscious decision was taken by the Narasimha Rao government in 1991 to engage Rangoon. Maung Aye met President Narayanan and Prime Minister Vajpayee as well as with members of the Confederation of Indian Industry. The team also traveled to Patna, Bodh Gaya, Bangalore, Jaipur and Agra. Ironically, India, which since the military coup in Pakistan has been an ardent campaigner for democracy, has no qualms about dealing with the military junta in Burma. “We will do what is in the best interests of the country. Every country does this,” said one Indian diplomat, who did not want to be identified.

"India says Aye to Myanmar generals," Nov 15. The Times of India
"Delhi forgets Suu Kyi, rolls out red carpet for general,” Nov 15. The Asian Age
"India accords red carpet welcome to Myanmar general," Nov 15. AFP
"India says Aye to Myanmar generals," Nov 15. The Times of India

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