

BURMA HUMAN RIGHTS YEARBOOK 2007
CHAPTER 12

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

“Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”

- Article 25 (1), Universal Declaration of Human Rights

12.1 Introduction

In 1994, the SPDC reaffirmed its commitment to uphold the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and though the UDHR unequivocally states that “*Everyone has the right to education*” and that “*Education shall be free*”, education in Burma remains anything but free or equal. Sadly, within the current political climate of Burma, education is regarded more as a privilege than as an inherent right.

The Burmese education sector is plagued by a severe lack of resources, stemming from an extremely small allocation of the national budget, which according to the United Nations Development Program’s (UNDP) Human Development Report, amounts to only 1.3 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹ Meanwhile, the SPDC maintains that 8.9 percent of the national budget is earmarked for education, although this figure is little more than a gross misrepresentation of reality.²

However, such a small budget allocation is hardly surprising given the regime’s stated belief that the sole purpose of education is to “*nurture children to develop their mind, vision and living styles in accord with the wishes of the State*”.³ In other words, the aim of education is to indoctrinate the nation’s children to develop a sense of obedience to the SPDC while crushing all views which may be deemed to run contrary to those of the State.

The education sector is also beset by widespread and rampant corruption from military officers, civil officials and even the teachers.

Compounding such an insufficient allocation of public funds to the sector are the misguided and egregious economic policies which have impoverished much of the population to the point where many must struggle just to acquire enough food, let alone pay for the rising costs of education.

The SPDC has attempted to control the minds of the Burmese population through its education system in two ways. The first of these has been by keeping that sector of the country so poor that teachers cannot afford to teach and that students cannot afford to learn. (For more information, see Chapter 6: Deprivation of Livelihood). Secondly, the junta monitors all school activities closely, keeping the quality of education so low that those who do matriculate into the secondary and tertiary levels are not permitted to learn anything the junta deems “*dangerous*”. To this end, the junta routinely controls and limits young people’s access to education. The regime actively discourages awareness of the outside world beyond Burma’s frontiers, particularly targeting students preparing to study abroad by watching their activities closely and at times prohibiting them from leaving the country altogether.⁴

According to Burmese law, education is supposed to be provided free of charge to all students up to the end of secondary schooling. However, credible reports have stated that a tenth standard education can cost as much as 300,000 kyat per year. To place this in context, this amount is higher than the national average annual income.⁵ School admissions fees have been reported to cost 2,500 kyat for primary school (first through fourth standard), 3,000 kyat for middle school (fifth through eighth standard) and 3,500 kyat for high school (ninth and tenth standard). Students are even charged 100 kyat for the admissions form. On top of this, students are also expected to pay for their own uniforms, books, and stationary, and for those students who must travel outside their home towns and villages to learn, they must also pay boarding fees at hostels near their schools.⁶ Such costs are unsurprisingly far beyond the means of many families, especially those in the lower socio-economic brackets.

In spite of this, education remains important to the Burmese people. In rural areas, many villages will do their best to still provide an education to their youth, appointing one person from the village to serve as teacher to the children. The person selected is typically one of the villagers who has received some level of education themselves. However, education has been in such a dismal state for so long that even the teachers may only have received a primary level education themselves. Ultimately, in such areas, there is an overall year on year decline in the level of education being taught.

Meanwhile, even in urban areas where it is common that a higher proportion of the population has received formal schooling and resources are more generously allocated, schools remain grossly underfunded. The lion's share of Burma's public spending remains allocated to the military and to maintaining its pervasive security apparatus. Kyaw Ko Ko of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) believes that such a policy needs to be changed to bring about substantive change in the country:

"Now, the state of education in Burma is very different from the past. It [the current education system] is worse than during the era of the British colonial administration. It gives more favor [Sic.] to quantity than quality. ... Students have lost their rights to freedoms of expression, such as freedom of thinking, writing and organizing students' unions. ... They [the junta] should change the basic education system. They should allow students to think freely. And in terms of increasing the budget for military equipment, they should reduce that amount and increase it accordingly for education".⁷

The fundamental freedoms of opinion and expression are forbidden, particularly among university students and their teachers, resulting in schools which discourage critical thinking in classrooms, limit reading materials, punish students for expressing their thoughts in writing, and prohibit student unions and rallies.⁸

Education has the potential to be a very powerful force in Burma, and the involvement of thousands of students and teachers from all over the country during the September Saffron Revolution protests attested to this fact. The intense crackdown on educational institutions both prior, during and subsequent to the protests confirms the junta's keen awareness of this power.



School children in Mandalay. [Photo: Phaung Daw Oo]

12.2 Primary Education

As a state party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Burma is obliged to provide compulsory and free primary level education for all children in the country. In 1993, two years after becoming a state party to the CRC, Burma enacted the Child Law in which it was clearly stated that *“Every child shall have the right to free basic primary education in state schools and that the Ministry of Education shall implement a system of free and compulsory primary education”*.⁹ However, in spite of these legal obligations, many Burmese children do not receive a proper primary education and those who do, do not receive it for free.

According to statistics provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), approximately 50 percent of children drop out of school before the end of primary school at the completion of fourth standard. The principal reason given for dropping out is typically financial hardship. When parents cannot afford to feed their families, education quickly becomes viewed as a luxury when compared alongside the more pressing needs of food security. Approximately 84 percent of this number are from rural areas where financial difficulties are often far more acute.¹⁰

Quality of education is affected by a number of factors, including a scarcity of schools, lack of skilled teachers and classroom resources. It has been reported that during 2007 in one primary school in Arakan State, there were only two teachers to balance 700 children in five separate classes.¹¹ This extremely high student to teacher ratio makes it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to provide meaningful and effective instruction.

Continued armed conflict in some ethnic minority areas, particularly in eastern Burma along the border with Thailand, has resulted in a number of primary schools being closed down or rendered unable to continue. SPDC army attacks on civilian villages typically result in the displacement of thousands, and while hiding in the forest, their villages, and the schools within them are routinely burned to the ground or otherwise razed by the soldiers. For instance, on 13 October 2007, the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) reported that villagers from Mon State were forced to flee their homes in Yaw Kee village and close their primary school after SPDC army units attacked their village with mortars and machine gun fire.¹² As a result of frequent military attacks on undefended civilian villages, schools in these areas are unable to stay open for any reasonable period of time. Another report by FBR from Nyaunglebin District in northern Karen State described a primary school which had to open and close repeatedly due to recurring SPDC army attacks.¹³ Similarly, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) reported that in March 2007, ongoing SPDC army attacks on civilian villages across Papun District, Karen State prevented regular schooling from continuing as families and whole communities had to flee their homes and hide in the forest. Still, schooling did not stop completely. Teachers were still able to conduct classes with their students under trees, albeit without many of the supplies that they were forced to leave behind when they fled.¹⁴

It is also common practice that villagers pay for the construction of schools. In many cases the orders for such works comes directly from the military, and purely so that they can take photographs of the completed school building which they then promote on national State-controlled television. Many of these schools, once built are abandoned as no teachers are ever provided to staff such schools, nor any supplies to stock them. In June 2007, it was reported that an SPDC army officer from Infantry Battalion (IB) #282 ordered local villages in Yebyu Township, Tenasserim Division to pay up to 100,000 kyat each towards the construction of a school solely for the children of the SPDC army soldiers. According to the report, a local *“school teacher has been asking for a cupboard for the village school for a long time but he could not help him but he is being forced to pay a 100,000 Kyat to the army”*.¹⁵

12.3 Secondary Education

In Burma, secondary schooling begins at fifth standard is divided into middle school from fifth standard to eighth standard, and high school comprising ninth and tenth standard.

The SPDC-affiliated Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) plays a significant role in education at the secondary level. Its members work to persuade students and teachers of the relevance and authority of the SPDC. Schools provide easy access to large groups of people, and on numerous occasions the USDA has forced teachers and students to attend gatherings and pose in solidarity with the junta at both pro-SPDC and pro-USDA rallies. On 30 September 2007, for instance, the USDA was reported to have forced 1,200 high school students and 250 teachers to join an estimated 30,000 civilians in rallies intended to condemn the “Saffron Revolution” protests which had swept the country in August and September and to promote the SPDC’s “Seven Step Roadmap to Democracy” and the work being done by the National Convention. Teachers stated that they had been threatened with punishment should they have refused to attend the rallies.¹⁶ (For more information, see Chapter 10: Freedom of Assembly, Association and Movement).

Financing the costs of education at the secondary level is a huge difficulty for families across the country, with schools charging students for everything from admissions forms to notebooks and pens to actual tuition. In June 2007, villagers in Thangtlang Township, Chin State, experienced a sudden and significant increase in school fees and the cost of school supplies. The price hikes reportedly only took place only in Thangtlang Township, strongly suggesting that corrupt local officials were behind the fee increases.¹⁷

For the first time in history, in December 2007, free additional tuition lessons were provided to high school students by the Falam Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC) in Chin State. Students in the area have reportedly had to typically hire private tutors to help them prepare for exams, although this option is only available for those who are able to afford it. Students from poorer families were therefore delighted to take advantage of this rare and seemingly generous offer from the junta. The private lessons were said to have been offered up until the completion of the nationwide board examinations.¹⁸ Though these trainings outwardly seem generous, it is quite likely that they were only offered so that the students would rank highly in the examinations and so that the TPDC could secure additional funding from the department of Education as a reward for high performance. (For more information, see Section 12.5 Corruption and Extortion in the Education System below).

In Arakan State, students must pay almost 50,000 kyat to sit for their final exams, not only on account of monetary extortion that they must pay for admission to the examination room, but also because the tests are often held away from their villages and thus the students must also pay for food and accommodation during the exam period. According to an unidentified “*education worker*”, at least 363 students from Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Rathedaung Townships who had enrolled for their matriculation exams in 2007 were not able to sit the exam due to the high costs associated with doing so.¹⁹

12.4 Tertiary Education

It is at the highest levels of the Burmese education system that the authorities are most suspicious of teachers, students and their activities. Traditionally, university students have been at the forefront of political opposition in Burma and so it is at this level of schooling that the junta's strict control of students and their activities becomes the most acute. Teachers and students alike are both subject to arrest, interrogation and detention even for mere suspicion that they may be involved in what the SPDC deems to be dissident political activity. All such political activity is firmly frowned upon by the junta, seemingly regardless if it is overtly political or not.

On 5 March 2007, Thwin Lin Aung, chairperson of the Myanmar Debate Society (MDS) and an English language teacher at the American Center in the US Embassy in Rangoon was arrested by the SPDC at Rangoon International Airport on the suspicion that he was travelling abroad to attend a political training program. He was transferred to the Aung Tha Pyay detention facility in Mayangone Township where he was detained for a month during which time he was interrogated repeatedly. This happened despite having told the soldiers that the trip was focussed on education – not politics and that he would only be visiting “museums, schools, NGOs” on the three-week trip to the United States and the Philippines.²⁰

Like their teachers, the activities and movements of tertiary students are also closely watched, and authorities often require teachers and others in the school community to monitor and report on the activities of students. In July 2007, the proprietors of hostels in the vicinity of Moulmein University were ordered to keep biographical data and a photograph of every student staying in their hostel. The Moulmein Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC) demanded that this data be sent to them and also warned hostel owners that if they would be arrested if they were discovered to be housing undocumented students during random inspections.²¹

Tertiary students can also face arrest should they fail to carry their student ID cards with them at all times or should they not obey the strictly imposed 10:00 pm curfew.²² In August 2007, the Special Branch of the police instituted a new regulation at Moulmein University restricting student access to the university campus, decreeing that no student or other person was permitted to enter the campus outside of class times, from 4:00 pm onwards.²³

Strict laws and regulations in school communities have led irritated, even exasperated students to acts of violence and rebellion. In July 2007, 15 students were expelled from Moulmein University after a clash with local residents. Similarly, in February of the previous year, a group of 200 students, frustrated at local traffic policemen who were seizing their unlicensed motorbikes, resorted to assault.²⁴ Meanwhile, at Myitkyina University in Mandalay Division, teachers have expressed annoyance at the haphazard rules and irregular meeting times enforced by the authorities, some saying they are so dissatisfied with their work that they actually want to resign.²⁵

On 2 September 2007, 84 students from the Tha Ohn Computer University in Mandalay were prohibited from sitting for their matriculation exams. The father of one student who had been barred from the examinations told the *Mizzima News* that “*Since he has not been allowed to appear for the examinations, he will lose a year*”. The official reason provided for their omission from the examination room was that they had not satisfied the mandatory 75 percent class attendance, although many believe that the students were being punished for their alleged involvement in the demonstrations over the fuel price increases that had been staged in Mandalay during August.²⁶ Similarly, 200 students had been barred from sitting their examinations a month earlier, although, no further information on this case has been made available.²⁷

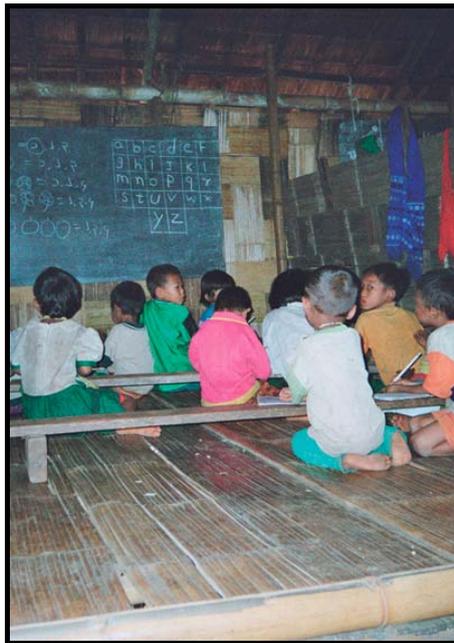
While programs in established universities are disrupted and inhibited at the will of the regime, there are SPDC-run programs which are so poorly designed that they reap no tangible benefits for the students. According to a report by the Independent Mon News Agency (IMNA) published in October 2007, in one case the junta tried to create links between tertiary students and the work force by sending individuals abroad each year on scholarship, under the guise that they would return to Burma armed with their new skills to work for the SPDC for a period of not less than ten years. However, the IMNA argued that rather than stimulating new employment opportunities, the program actually created more unemployment. A number of returnees were reportedly not provided with work upon their return, while those who decided not to return, were reportedly obliged to repay a sum of five million kyat to the SPDC. Unsurprisingly, this amount of debt is a great deterrent to leaving the country and those who were not provided with work upon returning to Burma were thus forced to remain, jobless, in Burma.²⁸

In September 2007, the Ministries of Information and of Education announced that they would offer a three-year Bachelor of Arts degree course in Journalism at the National Administration College (NAC) in Rangoon. Such a course had not been offered since the 1982-83 academic year.²⁹ However, it remains to be seen if the recommencement of this course will promote greater press freedom in Burma, although, given the proven inclination of the regime to suppress such freedoms, this would seem rather unlikely. (For more information, see Chapter 9: Freedom of Opinion, Expression, and the Press).

12.5 Corruption and Extortion in the Education System

Corruption is rampant in all levels of the Burmese education system and well-intentioned efforts made to improve education are typically stifled by egregious SPDC policies. With the prohibition on the formation of all free and independent unions in Burma, all attempts at forming student unions have been prohibited.³⁰ Meanwhile, students of all ages are often forced to join junta-affiliated organizations such as the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). According to authorities at the Department of Higher Education under the Ministry of Education, USDA membership and participation is a precondition for enrolling in all State-sponsored scholarship programs.³¹ Hence any student wishing to study overseas must first have a record of active membership with the USDA. Some reports have maintained that students are not even permitted to sit their matriculation exams if they do not first join the USDA. (For more information, see Chapter 10: Freedom of Assembly, Association and Movement).

Other SPDC-affiliated organizations, claimed to be both working for and representative of the people, also have a role to play in Burma's education system. On 6 June 2007, representatives of the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) visited an unnamed middle school in Shwepyitha Township on outskirts of Rangoon and distributed books and school supplies to the children there. After posing for a series of photographs, they reclaimed the books and left, leaving nothing for the children.³²



Primary school students studying in Karenni State [Photo: KSWDC]

In August 2007, the Ministry of Education reneged on its promise of funds for Basic Education High Schools (BEHS) in Moulmein, Mon State. As a result the people living in communities with BEHS were forced by their respective Township Peace and Development Councils (TPDC) to provide the funds themselves. The funds were only presented to schools which had pass percentages of more than 50 percent, as a reward for good performance, while denied to those schools whose pass percentages were lower than 50 percent as punishment. The Thanbyuzayat Township TPDC also provided this same system of rewards and punishments to students in Thanbyuzayat Township.³³ According to reports, many schools, desperately short of resources, and working with impoverished populations,

scramble for ways to achieve the minimum 50 percent pass rate required to secure this much needed funding. In some cases, schools stay open for six days a week, while in others, students are commonly held back for an extra year to ensure that they pass.³⁴

Cheating in order to pass a grade is reportedly also common. According to students in Chin State, many cheat on final examinations using a small book of answers that has been in circulation since 2001, while invigilators for the exams are paid 200 kyat by each student to turn a blind eye.³⁵ Some students say the book is sold covertly throughout Burma, and can be bought for between 1,000 and 3,000 Kyat.³⁶ Students also claimed that in parts of Chin State especially, students had become dependent on using the book to pass exams, and that class attendance has fallen sharply because of the availability of the book.³⁷

Furthermore, education officials operate with little to no accountability or transparency, routinely changing costs of school supplies and admissions fees, all without justification or explanation.

Teaching salaries are also arbitrarily revoked by the authorities, in some cases as punishment for noncompliance with official orders. In Thangtlang Township, Chin State, middle school teachers who refused to attend an obligatory training from 22 April and 18 May 2007 during their summer vacation had two months of their annual wages withheld as punishment. According to reports, many teachers in the area work as day labourers in neighbouring Mizoram in India during the summer months when they are no classes to supplement their meagre teacher's salaries. According to one teacher from the area:

"The market price is going up and one month's salary of 30,000 [kyat] is not enough to sustain us. Why do they have to have training sessions during vacations? They scheduled the training in summer because they know there will be absenteeism".³⁸

12.6 Impediments to Education

While teachers can be victimized by education officials and military authorities, students equally may be mistreated by their teachers. There are many accounts of teachers demanding food, money and other supplies such as firewood. The wages offered to SPDC-appointed teachers are typically extremely low and to make ends meet many turn to extorting money and goods from their students.

According to the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), one young Shan student was beaten and humiliated by his teacher for failing to provide her with curry as was expected of him. She had demanded that he recite all of the lessons taught throughout the year without referring to his book. When he was unable to do this, she ordered that he do 500 sit-ups and beat him repeatedly across the legs reportedly as many as 50 times, leaving many welts on his legs. According to the boy's parents, that night he wept and screamed in his sleep, saying, "Teacher, I am afraid, don't beat and hurt me anymore, please". Soon after the incident the teacher, whose name was not given in the original report, had threatened to leave after being confronted by the village chairperson. Fearful that she may have carried out this threat, the community withdrew its complaint and instead expelled the student from school.³⁹ It is apparent that such incidents work to render students powerless in the face of the teacher's authority, and victimize both the community and the students. When such events occur, the teacher plays the role of intimidator rather than the nurturer that they should be, ultimately affecting student's participation in class. At the end of the day, students are often left feeling that they cannot approach their teacher with their questions which, in turn, serves as a barrier against their learning.

Burma's acute lack of press freedom and the population's general inability to access information from the outside world through the sweeping restrictions on foreign newspapers, periodicals, television and filtering of the internet, makes it extremely difficult for students to do research or any kind of self-learning outside what they are given at school. During 2007, less than one percent of Burma's population had regular access to internet.⁴⁰ This is due not only due to the country's woefully inadequate communications infrastructure, but also to the prohibitive costs of internet access as well as the strict controls and usage monitoring that the SPDC enacts over it.⁴¹ (For more information, see Chapter 9: Freedom of Opinion, Expression, and the Press).

The American Center, located in the US Embassy in Rangoon, with its library and internet access, is closely monitored by the authorities and treated by the State-controlled media with both suspicion and contempt. In April 2007, the SPDC-controlled *New Light of Myanmar* ran an article denouncing a journalism class being hosted at the centre, vaguely accusing the course of "harming young Burma brains".⁴² The following month, on 3 May 2007, over 20 people were arrested outside the centre, having for having attended a seminar on labour rights. The six organizers of the event were later sentenced to prison terms of up to 28 years for "bringing hatred and contempt" against the regime.⁴³ (For more information, see Chapter 1: Arbitrary Detention and Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances).

Persons attempting to educate the public about issues such as human rights are watched closely and find it exceedingly difficult to hold meetings which are not disrupted by the SPDC or its agents. On 10 December 2007, the movements of U Myint Aye of the Human Rights Defenders and Protectors (HRDP) were shadowed by members of the USDA and *Swan Arr Shin* as he attempted to celebrate International Human Rights Day at his home.⁴⁴ The very presence of such groups has a tendency of discouraging activists from attending celebrations and trainings for fear of being targeted for arrest. (For more information, see Chapter 10: Assembly, Association, and Movement).

The population's thirst for knowledge is evidenced by its large, privatized publishing industry with approximately 250 privately-owned periodicals published throughout the country at the beginning of 2007.⁴⁵ Authorities permit literature so long as it conforms to the Ministry of Information's 'Seven-Point' policy for writers, which includes guidelines requiring that the writing "*shall be constructive and be in the interest of the nation*"; basically that it does not criticize the regime or any of its policies.⁴⁶ As a result, the news published is heavily constrained to light-hearted topics concerned with daily living: local crime, children, health, and sports. Thus students seeking information about world politics, opinion essays, or any kind of analytical reading typically have great difficulty obtaining it.

A severely neglected national infrastructure also impedes access to education in many cases. During heavy monsoon rains in late July 2007, the Irrawaddy River broke its banks, as it does every year, and classes in Yadanarpon University in Mandalay had to be suspended for five days due to water-saturated corridors. According to the *Irrawaddy*, this occurred only because the junta has taken no action whatsoever to prevent such flooding.⁴⁷ Similarly, residents of New Dagon Township in Rangoon complained that several schools had been shut down due to flooding. They blamed the Yangon City Development Council (YCDC) for collecting taxes but not using them to fix the city's urgent drainage problems.⁴⁸ On 15 October 2007, the NaSaKa (Border Security Force) arrested four villagers in Rathedaung Township, Arakan State for working with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) who helped them build a bridge and dig wells in their village. The villagers claimed they needed the bridge so their children could go to school during the monsoon months.⁴⁹

Perhaps the greatest impediment to education, particularly in the ethnic minority states, is ongoing armed conflict. In such areas, villagers, who are more often than not the direct and intended targets of State-sponsored violence, are repeatedly forced to flee their homes for fear of being forcibly relocated or simply killed. In these areas, displacement is often a repeat event, where some communities have been forced to relocate on numerous occasions. Obviously, repeated displacements such as this cause havoc on student's education as they must cease their studies each time that they are forced to flee and only start again when the situation is deemed safe enough to do so. Furthermore, after they have fled their villages, the soldiers who hunt them typically steal anything left behind and destroy everything else. Schools, supplies and books are often destroyed, and the villagers, who lose a little more of what little they have left each time that they are forced to flee, are often without the means to replace such items. Sadly, education often must take a back seat to the more pressing demands of food security, and when a community is facing shortages of food, every member of that community, including its teachers and students, is called upon to band together to help acquire as much food as possible. As a result, the education further suffers. (For more information, see Chapter 16: Internal Displacement and Forced Relocation).

Further impediments to education include public rallies organized by the SPDC and their ostensible civil society agents. Students have not been immune to these rallies, on occasion even being forced to forego attending classes just to attend such events. In Mon State in October 2007, 490 members of the local Moulmein school community were ordered to attend a rally celebrating the National Convention in Moulmein. According to reports, the students were all further ordered to change out of their school uniforms and into plainclothes so as to make it appear that they were not in fact school students.⁵⁰ It was reported that the SPDC had ordered large numbers of school students to attend rallies in support of the National Convention all over the country. (For more information, see Chapter 10: Assembly, Association, and Movement).

12.7 Preferential Treatment in the Education System

Throughout Burma, the education system has a tendency to work in favour of those with wealth and status whose children reap a far richer educational experience. According to the *Education News Journal*, over 80 percent of Burma's highest scoring students all come from wealthy and well-connected families in Rangoon. An experienced teacher with over 20 years experience in Burma's education system reported on condition on anonymity that "*rich students were able to buy their way to success*". Their parents could reportedly buy copies of exams papers in addition to paying tuition costs for more expensive and better equipped schools as well as for private tuition for their children. A father who paid an equivalent of US\$600 for his daughter's last year of High School believed that "*children who go to expensive school can always be clever*".⁵¹

Religious beliefs and affiliations also play an important role in the education system and what school students can and cannot attend. In July 2007, it was reported that students in the predominantly Christian Putao Township, Kachin State, were being forced to convert to Buddhism should they wish to further their education. According to the Kachin News Group (KNG), Christian students wishing to complete their secondary education up to tenth standard at the NaTaLa (Ministry of Border Affairs) school in Putao were obliged to convert to Buddhism and pay obeisance to Buddhist pagodas and register themselves as Buddhists on the school registration form.⁵² (For more information, see Chapter 8: Freedom of Belief and Religion).



A typical crowded primary school classroom in central Burma. [Photo: Asia Peace and Education Foundation]

12.8 Educational Opportunities for Ethnic Minorities

In spite of the existence of a number of tenets in international law which provide ethnic minorities with not only equal access to education, but also the right to their own language and its use, ethnic minorities in Burma continue to be discriminated against and are granted fewer educational opportunities than those of the Burman majority. Moreover, in a number of cases, ethnic groups in Burma are even denied the right to learn and study their own language.

The Mon have come from a long tradition of culture and literacy and are particularly aware of their culture's suppression under the SPDC. The teaching of the Mon language, like many other ethnic minority languages, is not permitted in Burma. Instead, the SPDC enforces the teaching of only the Burmese language in Mon areas in a purported attempt to obliterate the Mon culture and replace it with a Burma-dominated culture. Mon scholars have cautioned that the language and culture could disappear in the future as a result of such policies.⁵³ However, in the face of such restrictions, the Mon still retain their long and proud tradition of education. To learn their own language, many students receive private tuition, most of which must be taught in secret so as to avoid repercussions, or attend schools that are not administered by the SPDC. The Mon National Education Department (MNEC) oversees approximately 1,000 teachers and over 50,000 students.⁵⁴

The Mon Literature and Culture Committee (MLCC) report that while they believe the learning of Mon language to be on the rise throughout the state, there has been a perceptible decrease in student enrolment in a summer language course in the Mon San Pya town quarter. The language course, which aims to promote the learning of the Mon mother tongue in response to its oppression under the Burmese regime, was created in 2001 in a community of about 2,000 people. The committee reported that though they began with 600 children, they saw significant dropout rates each year due to financial hardship, the largest occurring in April 2007, when 100 students could not attend the course.⁵⁵

A number of other ethnic minorities have faced similar restrictions against the education and use of their own languages. Such groups include, but are not limited to, the Karen, Karenni, Rohingya, Kachin, Shan, and others.



Displaced villagers study Karen and English at a temporary hiding site in the forests of Nyaunglebin District in February 2007. The teacher writes with chalk using the side of large rock outcropping as a blackboard. [Caption and photo: KHRG]

In Loi Talang, Shan State, schools and orphanages have been built by the opposition Shan State Army – South (SSA-S) in areas under their control which provide free food and education to over 1,000 children, 250 of whom are orphans. According to reports, prior to arriving at these schools most of these children had never before attended school or studied the Shan language.⁵⁶

Many ethnic minority areas experience chronic levels of forced labour, which detracts from the amount of time that both students and teachers are available to attend school. Many families, faced with numerous demands of labour sometimes from several different sources are not able to meet all such demands while also working to provide for the family. In such instances, children must often forego school to help with the family's survival, either by working in the fields or by performing forced labour while their parents are tending to the family's livelihood.

Moreover, ongoing military offensives targeting civilian villagers in some parts of the country, most notably in Karen State, have significant impact on the educational opportunities of students in these areas. In such areas, military assaults on undefended civilian villagers force villagers to flee into the surrounding forests for fear of being killed or rounded up and interned at SPDC-garrisoned forced relocation sites. (For more information, see Chapter 16: Internal Displacement and Forced Relocation). Regular flight into the forest ahead of approaching SPDC army columns has obvious detrimental effects on students' ability to learn. It has been reported in some areas that students are only able to study for one week a month as a result.⁵⁷ However, when hiding in the forests, many communities still find a way to provide their children with an education by building small makeshift schools in the forests.⁵⁸

As a result of the oppression that they face at home, many people living in the ethnic border states of Burma make the difficult decision to move to a neighbouring country where they hope life will be better. In the town of Mae Sot on the Thai-Burma border, the Migrant Teacher's Association (MTA) reported in July 2007 that at that time there were over 5,000 migrant and refugee children of the Karen ethnicity occupying over 50 unofficial migrant schools in the area. When questioned about her new life in Thailand, one child said, *"My mother came here to work as she couldn't make money in Burma. ... I'm happy to stay here. When we were in Burma we had to borrow money to pay our tuition fees but here we have everything."*⁵⁹ (For more information, see Chapter 17: Situation of Refugees and Chapter 18: Situation of Migrants).

12.9 Effects of the Saffron Revolution Protests on the Education System

The power of education in Burma, and the regime's resultant fear of it, became especially evident during the Saffron Revolution protests throughout August and September 2007. The roles played by students and teachers in the protests, coupled with the systematic clamping down on educational institutions around the country at the onset of the protests illustrated how the SPDC's maintenance and manipulation of the State is highly dependent on its iron-fisted control over the school system and the minds of the people associated with it.

Much as had happened during the 1988 pro-democracy protests, university and high school students across the country played key roles in the protests, taking to the streets to join in solidarity with the monks and civilians demonstrating against the continuance of military rule.

The school year was disrupted by sweeping school closures, class cancellations, and the arrest and killing of many teachers and students. (For more information, see Chapter 1: Arbitrary Detention, and Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, Chapter 3: Extra-Judicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, and Chapter 11: The Saffron Revolution – The 2007 Pro-Democracy Movement).

At noon on 28 August 2007, Akyab (Sittwe) University in Arakan State was ordered to close, instructing students to return to their homes. The closure coincided with the first day of protests.⁶⁰

On 2 September 2007, high schools and middle schools in Sittwe which had earlier been closed following some of the initial monk-led protests in late August were reopened purely so that the authorities could record the names, ages, addresses, and photographs of the students. As soon as this had been accomplished, the schools were ordered to close again on 6 September 2007. Those students who did not attend school during the few days that the schools had resumed were visited at their homes by embers of the USDA who went from house to house to record the students' details.⁶¹ Similarly, the names of young novice monks studying in monasteries in Sittwe were also recorded. This was done presumably so that the authorities would know who to arrest later should the students and novices become involved in the growing protest movement.

Meanwhile, monks from Bangladesh who were studying in Arakan State were ordered to return home after all centres of religious learning in Sittwe were ordered to close.⁶²

On 23 September 2007, a school teacher who had been taking photographs of monks demonstrating against the SPDC in Myitkina was arrested by Special Branch police and taken away on the back of a motorcycle.⁶³

On 27 September 2007, Myitkyina University in Kachin State was ordered to close its doors for fear that the students would join the nationwide pro-democracy protests. The order reportedly came directly from Northern Regional Commander Ohn Myint, who later ordered that all students were to return to their homes on 1 October 2007. The examinations had not yet been completed when the order was issued.⁶⁴

Religious education was devastated by the protests, with monastic schools shut down and raided and monks having to flee the schools. During the time of the protests, an estimated 500 monks from neighbouring countries were studying Buddhism in Burma. Of this number, "dozens" were believed to have been arrested.⁶⁵

By the end of September 2007, thousands of protestors had been arrested in relation to the protests. Such a high number of arrests over such a short period of time far exceeded the penal system's capacity. Many of the country's closed and empty universities and high schools were thus set up as temporary detention facilities, to house many detainees who could not fit in the jails.⁶⁶

On 1 October 2007, the Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) located in Insein Township, Rangoon was ordered closed *"for reasons related to the ongoing demonstrations"*. The students were reportedly dismissed before they could sit for their final examinations or hand in their papers. MIT is a Christian Protestant seminary offering a variety of courses in theology to a little over 1,000 students, the majority of whom were of the Karen or Chin ethnic minorities.⁶⁷

On 1 October 2007, it was reported that numerous universities around the country had been closed down by the authorities. Universities, such as the Yangon University of Dental Medicine, Pa'an University, Nursery Training University in Moulmein, and the Government Technical College (GTC) in Mandalay were all ordered to suspend classes and close in late September 2007.⁶⁸

By the beginning of October, schools in Rangoon had begun to reopen, although attendance remained low as parents feared further crackdowns and refused to allow their children to return to school.⁶⁹

As a result of the September protests, students at the University of Distance Education (UDE) from Kachin State had their October-November examinations postponed until December, at which time they had to travel to the University of Myitkyina.⁷⁰

An unknown number of students were arrested and detained for having joined the monks in the protests during August and September 2007. Four of those known to have been arrested were first-year mathematics students at West Rangoon University. The four were summarily tried and sentenced to lengthy jail terms for joining the protests. At least one of the group was reported to have been detained in a cell with adults despite the fact that he was a minor under the age of 18 and that such practices run contrary to Burmese law.⁷¹ Two months later, this 17-year-old was still being held at Insein Prison in Rangoon and had maintained having been beaten repeatedly during his detention.⁷²

On 17 December 2007, it was reported that 25 monks had been expelled from Kaba Aye Sangha University in Rangoon for having participated in the September protests.⁷³

In December 2007, it was reported that any student wearing black to university as a sign of mourning for those killed in the protests were refused entry to sit their now much delayed final examinations. On 21 November 2007, approximately 100 students from East Rangoon University who had worn black to their examinations were forced to sign an agreement stating that they would not wear black again. According to reports, *"Even those students who were not aware of the campaign but happened to be wearing black that day were forced to sign, but were not told why they had to do so"*.⁷⁴ Similarly, at Rangoon University, invigilators were instructed to record the names of all students seen wearing black. Students were warned that anyone wearing black in a show of mourning risked having their examination results nullified or possibly even being expelled from school.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, it was reported that any student wearing black to Prome University in Pegu Division were to be barred entry to the campus.⁷⁶

Endnotes

- ¹ Source: *Human Development Report 2007/2008; Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world*, UNDP, 27 November 2007.
- ² Source: *Burma Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2005*, US Department of State, 8 March 2006.
- ³ Source: Source: "The Junta's Educational Mandate," *Irrawaddy*, 8 September 2006.
- ⁴ Source: "Junta Urged to Honor the Right to Education," *Mizzima News*, 19 March 2007.
- ⁵ Source: *Burma Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2005*, US Department of State, 8 March 2006.
- ⁶ Source: "Unfair Tuition Fees Demanded," *Rhododendron News*, CHRO, July-August 2006.
- ⁷ Source: "Burma's National Day Celebrated in Rangoon," *Irrawaddy*, 4 December 2007.
- ⁸ Source: *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Source: Burmese Child Law (1993), Section 20.
- ¹⁰ Source: *Burma Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2005*, US Department of State, 8 March 2006.
- ¹¹ Source: "WFP Distributes Rice among Students in Arakan," *Kaladan News*, 15 November 2007.
- ¹² Source: "Burma Army Shoots and Kills Two People, Villager Steps on Mine, Hundreds Remain in Hiding," FBR, 24 November 2007.
- ¹³ Source: "Burma Army Offensive: Northern Karen State," FBR, 9 November 2007.
- ¹⁴ Source: *Road construction, attacks on displaced communities and the impact on education in northern Papun District*, KHRG, 26 March 2007.
- ¹⁵ Source: "Army Demands Money to Build School for Soldiers' Children," IMNA, 13 June 2007.
- ¹⁶ Source: "USDA Slams Public Protests At Rally," DVB, 30 September 2007.
- ¹⁷ Source: "Hike in School Fees Puts Parents in A Spot Thantlang," *Khonumthoung News*, 18 June 2007.
- ¹⁸ Source: "Junta Provides Free Tuition for Students in Chin State," *Khonumthoung News*, 3 December 2007.
- ¹⁹ Source: "Examinees for SSC Decrease in Northern Arakan," *Narinjara News*, 15 March 2007.
- ²⁰ Source: "Teacher of American Center Released after Month's Detention," *Mizzima News*, 2 April 2007.
- ²¹ Source: "Moulmein University Students Watched," IMNA, 17 July 2007.
- ²² Source: *Ibid.*
- ²³ Source: "Heightened Security in Moulmein University," IMNA, 23 August 2007.
- ²⁴ Source: "Moulmein University Students Watched," IMNA, 17 July 2007.
- ²⁵ Source: "UDE Students in Myitkyina Love Examinations before Christmas," KNG, 21 December 2007.
- ²⁶ Source: "Tha Ohn Computer University Bars 84 Students from Exams," *Mizzima News*, 5 September 2007.
- ²⁷ Source: *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Source: "Burmese Junta's Scholarships Create Unemployment," IMNA, 17 October 2007.
- ²⁹ Source: "Myanmar to Introduce Journalism Degree Course for First Time," Xinhua, 5 September 2007.
- ³⁰ Source: "Annual Chin Student Leaders Meet in Burma Concluded," *Khonumthoung News*, 10 Feb.
- ³¹ Source: "Burmese Students Pressured To Join USDA To Win Scholarships," DVB, 1 February 2007.
- ³² Source: "The Inanity of Dictatorship," UPI Asia, 15 June 2007.
- ³³ Source: "Authorities Back Out of Promise to Grant Aid to High Schools in Mon State," IMNA, 23 August 2007.
- ³⁴ Source: *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Source: "The 'Small Book' To Cheat In Board Examinations," *Khonumthoung News*, 20 April 2007.
- ³⁶ Source: *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Source: *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Source: "Teachers Absent from Training Lose Two Months Salary," *Khonumthoung News*, 29 May 2007.
- ³⁹ Source: "Teacher Bully Students," SHAN, 17 December 2007.
- ⁴⁰ Source: "Myanmar's Bogs of Bloodshed," *Asia Times*, 29 September 2007.
- ⁴¹ Source: *Ibid.*
- ⁴² Source: "Six Labor Activists in Burma Jailed for Up to 28 Years," *Irrawaddy*, 8 September 2007.
- ⁴³ Sources: "Six Still Detained, Others Released," *Narinjara News*, 3 May 2007; "Six Labor Activists in Burma Jailed for Up to 28 Years," *Irrawaddy*, 8 September 2007.
- ⁴⁴ Source: "Activists Celebrate International Human Rights Day," DVB, 10 December 2007.
- ⁴⁵ Source: "Myanmar to Introduce Journalism Degree Course for First Time," Xinhua, 5 September 2007.
- ⁴⁶ Source: *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ Source: "Flooding Leaves Many Homeless in Central Burma," *Irrawaddy*, 3 August 2007.
- ⁴⁸ Source: "Rangoon Residents Blame YCDC for Flooding," DVB, 10 July 2007.
- ⁴⁹ Source: "Burma's Security Force Arrests Four Villagers in Rathedaung," *Kaladan News*, 27 November 2007.
- ⁵⁰ Source: "Teachers Not to Wear Uniforms for Tomorrow's Rally," IMNA, 5 October 2007.
- ⁵¹ Source: "High School Rankings Rouse Resentment Among Parents, Students," DVB, 21 February 2007.
- ⁵² Source: "Junta Forces Locals into Buddhism in Northern Burma," KNG, 30 July 2007.

-
- ⁵³ Source: "Need For Mons to Be Aware That Language Could Disappear: Mon Professor," IMNA, 15 October 2007.
- ⁵⁴ Source: "Mon Woman Leader Almost Loses Job over Slow Mail Service," *Kaowao News*, 13 January 2007.
- ⁵⁵ Source: "Number of Mon Students Learning Mother Tongue Drops In Pegu," IMNA, 6 April 2007.
- ⁵⁶ Source: "Driven from Their Homes," SHAN, 13 December 2007.
- ⁵⁷ Source: *One Year On: Continuing Abuses in Toungoo District*, KHRG, 17 November 2006.
- ⁵⁸ Source: *Road Construction, Attacks on Displaced Communities and the Impact on Education in Northern Papun District*, KHRG, 26 March 2007.
- ⁵⁹ Source: "Schools Closed as Fighting Continues in Karen State," DVB, 10 July 2007.
- ⁶⁰ Source: "Akyab University Closes Temporarily," *Narinjara News*, 30 August 2007.
- ⁶¹ Source: "Junta Authorities Make List of Students List in Akyab," *Kaladan News*, 8 October 2007.
- ⁶² Source: *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ Source: "School Teacher Arrested for Photographing Monks in Myitkyina," NMG, 23 September 2007.
- ⁶⁴ Source: "Myitkyina University Students Forced To Go Home," *Mizzima News*, 4 October 2007.
- ⁶⁵ Source: "12 More Buddhist Monks Flee To Bangladesh," *Kaladan News*, 13 December 2007.
- ⁶⁶ Source: "Myanmar's Largest Cities Locked down during UN Envoy's Visit," AP, 30 September 2007.
- ⁶⁷ Source: "Political Instability, Unrest Affects Religious Schools," KNG, 3 October 2007.
- ⁶⁸ Source: "Number of University in Burma Closed," IMNA, 1 October 2007.
- ⁶⁹ Source: "Random Search and Arrest on Suspicion in Rangoon," *Mizzima News*, 4 October 2007.
- ⁷⁰ Source: "UDE Students in Myitkyina Love Examinations before Christmas," KNG, 21 December 2007.
- ⁷¹ Source: "Student Protestors Face Serious Charges," DVB, 28 December 2007.
- ⁷² Source: "Detained Student Beaten In Custody," DVB, 13 December 2007.
- ⁷³ Source: "Monks Expelled from Sangha University," *Irrawaddy*, 17 December 2007.
- ⁷⁴ Source: "Students Wear Black to Protest Crackdown Deaths," DVB, 13 December 2007.
- ⁷⁵ Source: "University Invigilators Target Students in Black Dresses," *Mizzima News*, 26 November 2007.
- ⁷⁶ Source: "Students Wear Black to Protest Crackdown Deaths," DVB, 13 December 2007.