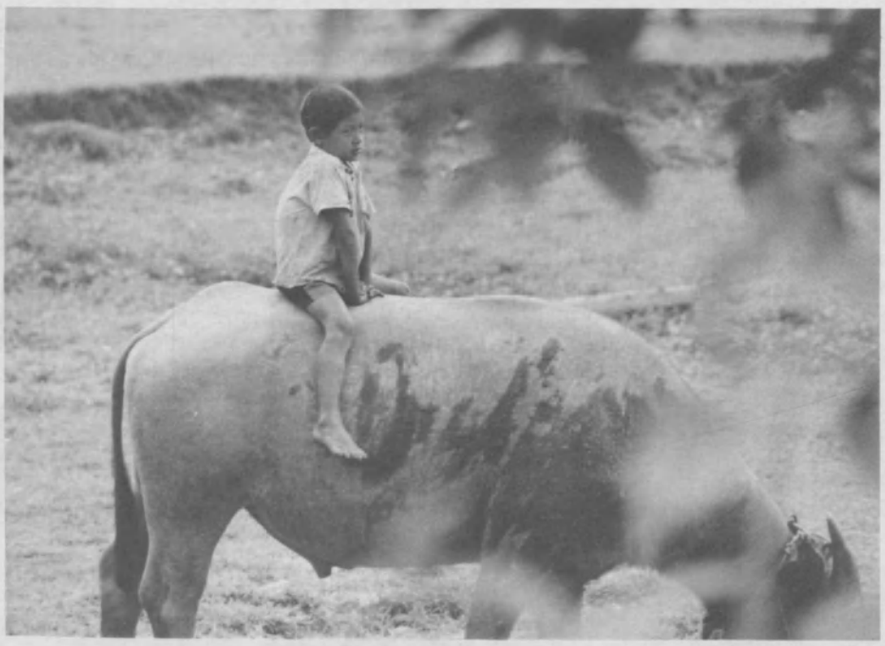
B. U. R. M. A.

BURMA RIGHTS MOVEMENT FOR ACTION

JULY 1993 Vol. 3 Number 7

CONTENTS

2 CIVIL WAR
Displacement
3 ENVIRONMENT
Logging
4 ECONOMICS
The Economic Quadrangle
5. HUMAN RIGHTS
A New State of Serfdom
6 POLITICS
Peace Talks
7 BUDDHISM
Buddhism and Human Rights
8 NEWS BRIEFS
Registered Companies
Border Area Development
Singapore
China
Tourism
Ethnic Cleansing
Drugs



"It is not important that life be filled with the luxuries and conforts created by people. These things do not always bring happiness and pleasure. Life's small blessings are often much more valuable and precious. To live free from fear. To till the good earth and eat the fruits of your own labor. To know that your children can laugh and play safely and that they will have a future free from worry and pain. To smell the fresh air and drink the spring water. These are assets no one can buy or sell.

Yet, free as they are, millions of people around the world are deprived of them because of the oppression of war. Only when all people join together to end the tyranny of war can these small blessings become reality "

Anon

P.O. Box 1076, Silom Post Office, Bangkok 10504 Thailand

CIVIL WAR

Unlike previous years, Slorc's fierce military offensives in the ethnic minority areas have remained deceptively silent. In fact the junta's national convention is drawing the attention of both internal and international groups away from it's systematic and cruel military operations. At the present time massive relocations and starvation are rapidly increasing the number of the internally displaced people in the countryside. This human misery remains, for the most part, still hidden from the eyes of the world.

This year the Slorc accelerated it's "Four Cuts" program in the countryside with the aim of isolating the civilians from armed dissidents.

As a part of the operation, large buffer zones are being set up. In reality these are free fire zones created by massive relocations of the populations. The Slorc army has informed the people that anyone seen in the "Free Fire zones" will be shot on sight. Thousands of people are being forced to abandoned everything they have build up all their lives. These people are simple farmers and now suffer from various diseases in the new relocation sites. Malaria, cholera and dysentery are major killers in the new over-crowded relocation sites. No medical assistance is provided. Children and old people are especially victimized by the junta's operations.

Another step of the operation plan is to cut food supplies into the guerrilla-active areas. Slorc orders all the people to store their rice in granaries near to army camps. Whenever the villagers need rice they must come and carry only an amount which is necessary for a week. Most of the villagers lost all their rice because the soldiers stole the rice and sold it again to rice merchants traveling through the area. The villagers do not dare to protest against the soldiers. As a solution the villagers try to hide their rice in some secret place, but this is also risky. If they do not provide rice for the soldiers, they are fined heavily.

At the present time the monsoons have arrived. This is the right time for rice planting. The farmers in the relocation camps have to ask permission from the army officials to return to their rice fields. The army allows the farmers to stay in their own villages for only a week and then must return to stay in the camp for another week. If they can get a rice crop in this year, they may well lose it in November when the military begins their next dry season offensive. If so, the villagers will face mass starvation and could begin a hugh migration to the Thai/Burma border where their only hope for survival will lie.

People can not easily carry medicine into areas which Slorc suspects to be insurgent areas. A part of the Slorc army plan is to also cut medicine supplies into the guerrilla-active areas. The plan has a terrible effect on the people who do not have adequate medicine, and leads to an increase in the number of deaths from various diseases. The guerrillas themselves can import at least some medicine from the Thai-Burma border for their own use.

Along with military operations, the undercover agents of the military intelligence called "MI" are carrying out secret operations. Their aim is to uncover the backbone of the rebel movement and destroy it. MI agents are even more powerful then army commanders. A lot of people are accused of being rebel sympathizers or infiltrators and are tortured in the investigation centers. A number of people are arbitrarily killed by the agents, and many have simply disappeared after the MI agents took them away. Relatives or family members of the rebels are detained in reeducation camps.

The present much publicized National Convention organized by Slorc will not change the situation in the countryside. It can only bring cosmetic changes to the urban areas. The Slorc has even been hinting that the future president of Burma has to be from the military.

The main issue facing Burma today is the civil war and lack of political freedom. Every effort must be made to highlight these issues and push for immediate solutions. Only then can the hundreds of thousands of displaced people throughout Burma and neighboring countries have the opportunity to return home and rebuild their lives.

The remains of a village destroyed by Burmese troops

ENVIRONMENT

Logging

The Thai timber industry was recently shocked by a Slorc announcement that all logging concessions in Burma would be ended by the end of 1993. Thai companies have 47 logging concessions along the 2,300 kilometer-long Thai/Burma border. Ending the concessions is a big setback for the Thai companies, not only because they have invested heavily in equipment to bring the cut logs out of Burma, but also because the 1989 ban on logging in Thailand is still being enforced, and Burma is the most accessible source for the vast amounts of wood needed to keep the Thai logging industry alive. In 1992, Thai logging companies imported about 700,000 tons of timber from Burma. (TN 930630)

Several visits by Thai officials have been made to Burma in the hopes of reversing the decision but Slorc continues to stand firm. In August, Thai Deputy Agriculture and Cooperatives Minister Suthep Thueksuban will visit Rangoon once again to try to persuade the ruling junta to extend the logging concessions for Thai merchants. (BP 930622)

The actual reason for the end of concessions still remains a matter of some speculation. Several theories have been put forward. One is that the Slorc is upset by the fact that Thai logging companies have been paying a logging tax to ethnic forces along the border who are battling the Slorc military regime for more autonomy. Slorc wants to totally isolate these ethnic forces so that a military victory can finally be achieved over them. Such a victory would insure Slorc's rule in the country without further armed opposition. This theory is supported by the fact that, starting in 1994, Burmese companies will be given concessions for logging, and will sell the cut and/or processed timber to Thai companies only through the port in Rangoon or through a sea port at the southernmost tip of Burma opposite Ranong Thailand. All land routes would be closed. It is through these land routes that the ethnic forces can tax Thai logging companies.

A second theory is that Slorc simply wants to increase their income from the sale of their natural resources. When the concessions were first signed in 1988 and 1989, Slorc was desperate for money and so they sold the concessions cheaply and without a proper plan. Now that the Thai companies are so dependent on Burma as a source of wood, the price can be upped.

The Myanma Timber Enterprise, controlled by the Forestry Minister, is now developing a wood-based industry. (NLM 930622) The export of teak and other woods has been reduced and attention to the production of sawn timber, veneer wood and plywood, flooring blocks, furniture and mortised wood is being emphasized. Slorc sees this as a way of significantly increasing their earnings. Their example is Malaysia which is said to be earning over US$4,000 million a year from their forest industry because it is exporting only finished wooden products. (NLM 930622)

Fujimoto Company from Japan has been promoting the wood industry in Burma since 1987. One of the factories they helped establish is No. 5 Furniture Factory in Ahlon Township. It produces mortised wood using by-products such as teak knots, post stumps and sawn-off teak wood. From 1988 until 1993, this factory consumed 8,131 tons of timber and exported finished products to Fujimoto Company in Japan earning US$4.58 million. (NLM 930622) Fujimoto plans to increase their demand for process wood from Burma.

Slorc can earn much more foreign exchange by taking total control of logging inside their country. Not only can they exclude the ethnic minorities, in whose areas most of the virgin forests of the country exist, from earning income from the exploitation of the forest resources, but they can also increase the prices, relying on the great demand Thailand and other countries now have for precious hardwoods.

A third theory put forward by some observers is that Slorc is bowing to international pressure to stop destroying its forests. This theory suggests that Slorc is concerned about their international reputation and is also concerned about environmental issues within their country. A *New Light of Myanmar* article suggests that this in one of the theories Slorc would like to promote. **The Ministry of Forestry [of Burma] is only proceeding with due consideration to maintain a balance between forest conservation and timber extraction. It is to serve the long-term interests of the country and the people, and also to protect forest areas and cachment areas along the border in the interests of both countries, that the Ministry of Forestry has decided to stop border logging concessions at the end of the year.** (NLM 930629)

The full logic behind Slorc's move to end the concessions could well be a mixture of the above three theories. However, there are some people who feel that Slorc may have a much more sinister strategy, aimed not only at making more money and isolating the ethnic forces along the border, but also of forcing some political changes in Thailand as well. *The Nation* of Thailand quotes a reliable source as saying that, **Burma wants to exert pressure on the Thai government's foreign policies by citing Bangkok's support for its minority groups. Burma's State Law and Order Restoration Council (Slorc) favors a military government [in Thailand] rather than the elected government of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai.**

The source went on to say, **Burma has more reasons than meets the eye for not extending the concessions for Thai businessmen. People will hold a negative view of the government if Thai traders lose their investments because of Thailand's backing for minority groups.** (TN 930630)

ECONOMICS

The Economic Quadrangle

A new economic "dream" has been partially unveiled which will develop the northern areas of Thailand. The plan, often referred to as the "Economic Quadrangle" or "Golden Quadrangle", would involve road and rail links between Chiang Rai in northern Thailand with Laos, Burma and China. Presently this area is more commonly known as the "Golden Triangle" and produces the majority of the world's heroin.

One of the major goals of Thailand, which is pushing the plan strongly, is to start trade with China's southern region. Many people in Thailand see this region as one of Thailand's largest markets in the near future. (BP 930718)

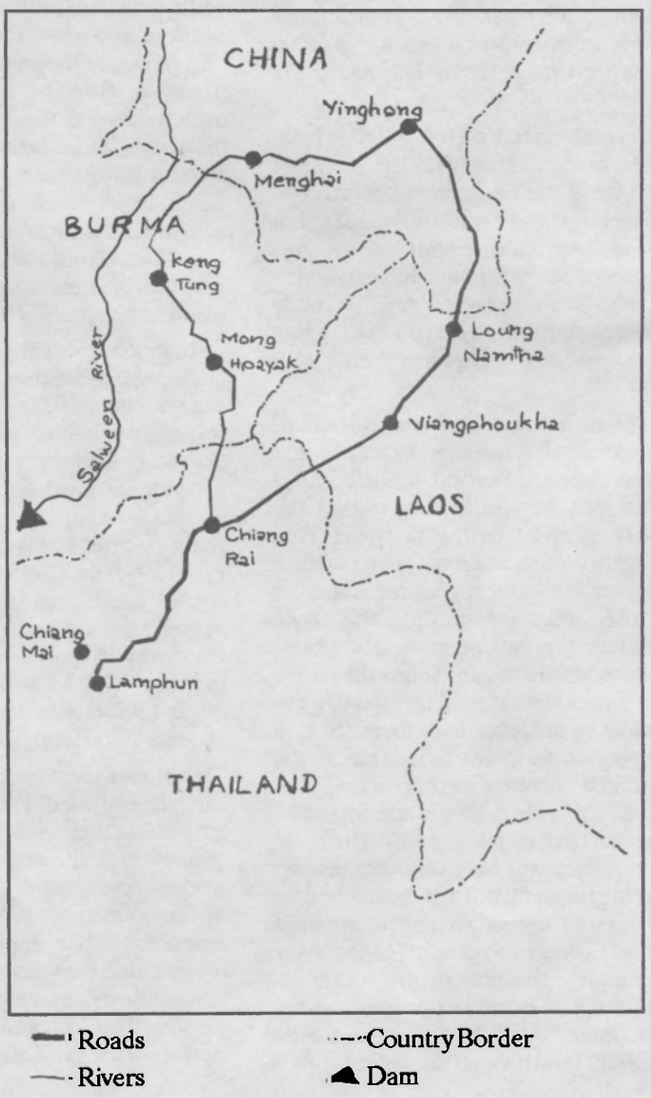
However, Burma and Laos lie between China and Thailand. Thus they too must be involved in the plan. Not only do Thai businesspeople see both Burma and Laos as good potential markets for Thai goods and cheap labor for industrial expansion, they also view Burma and Laos as tourist destinations which can be exploited.

The Chart Thai political party of Thailand seems particularly interested in the golden quadrangle, and analysts suggest part of the reason is that members of this political party have already invested much in the Chiang Rai area of Thailand and have also already entered Burma and Laos. According to the *Bangkok Post*, Member of Parliament (MP) Praphat Phothasuthon is building a casino on the Burmese side of the border and is running a tree plantation in Laos. Deputy party leader Vattana Asavahame plans to establish tourist routes in the Mekong River. Party advisor Narong Wongwan is running a vast business empire in the area including the first-class Golden Triangle Hotel with a cigarette-making factory and a hotel in Laos. (BP 930718)

One aspect of the development plan which could have serious environmental and economic effects on parts of Burma and Thailand is a proposal, put forward by Chiang Rai businessman Sawat Boonprian and supported by Narong Wongwan, to build a dam on Burma's Salween River and divert the water into northern Thailand. With adequate water, the entire area could be industrialized. However, the area is huge, stretching from the Thai/Burma border through Chiang Rai and on down to Chiang Mai and Lamphun. The amounts of water needed to develop this area would be enormous. There have also been suggestions that, in the future, water from the Salween would be diverted on down to the Chao Phrya River which is one of the main waterways of Thailand. The Chao Phrya River has been suffering a drop in water levels due to a lowering of rainfall following vast deforestation in Thailand.

The dam, which may be built starting the end of 1993, would most certainly lower down-stream water levels of the Salween creating damage to the flora and fauna which depend on the river. Lower water levels could also negatively affect Karen, Karenni and other villagers who live along the river and depend on it for transportation and food. At the same time, Thai logging companies working in Burma have stripped many hillsides in the Salween River area, bare of trees. The entire life on both sides of the border could be forced to change due to altered weather patterns, erosion and a shortage of much needed water. The Burmese military has announced that they have plans to build eight more dams along the Salween further down stream.

There has been no indication that a proper environmental impact study has been done, but reports suggest that agreements for the dam and road construction have basically already been made and work could begin in the near future.



HUMAN RIGHTS

A New State of Serfdom

Despite the fact that the 1993 military offensive of Slorc has not materialized to the extent many people expected it would, the suffering of the people in ethnic nationality areas has not abated. In fact, in some areas reports suggest that it is even worse than previous years although it has not been publicized internationally.

In Slorc-controlled areas of the Karen State, new army troops from 99 Light Infantry Division have been assigned. They have begun a systematic subjugation of the Karen civilian population through terror and forced relocation. Entire regions of western Karen State are being declared free-fire zones, while civilian populations are being driven into relocation camps and garrison villages where they form a pool of slave labor and porters for future offensives.

Some observers have compared this to the ancient days of feudal states or serfdoms where war lords gained their power and labor force by moving local populations into villages around their castles. Along with providing the war lords with a large labor force, the villages also provided a buffer zone between possible enemy campaigns and the castle.

In the Karen State, the Slorc is not only moving thousands of villagers (some estimates place the number of displaced persons in the Karen State at around 500,000) into camps around Slorc army camps, but is also declaring their old village and farm areas as free fire zones. At present a free fire zone has been created west of the opposition headquarters at Mannerplaw and runs almost 200 kilometers from north to south. Villagers who do not want to be resettled near Slorc army camps are either fleeing to the Thai/Burma border, or hiding deep in the jungle.

Naw Htoo Say, and 30-year-old Karen woman describes the situation in this way:

The Burmese soldiers abuse us so much we can not even describe it. Whenever they see any villager, the soldiers do whatever they want to them before they even interrogate them. They torture people, and no one can vouch or plead for their freedom. They say, 'If we find anyone outside the village that person must be our enemy. If they were civilians they would stay in the village.'

Now they have given an order that we are not even allowed outside the village without a special paper. If we want to go out, we have to ask their permission and pay them i kyat for each person who is going, and they give us a paper that is only good until sundown. If they catch us outside without a paper or if we are absent from the village at any time, they do whatever they want to us.

They torture people in many ways. Sometimes they slash people's skin and put salt and chilies in the wounds - I saw them do this to 7 men one time. They make people go without food, and another time they took out a villager's eye. We often find the bodies of villagers the soldiers have killed. They never bury them, just strip them naked and leave them laying there.

The soldiers always take women now because all the men have fled the village. In the village the soldiers call the women and if they like a girl they ask for her love. When she refuses they force her and rape her. I have two friends to whom they have done this. The soldiers were terrible to them. We wanted to report it to their officer, but the soldiers say, 'If you go and report it then you must be a Karen soldier'. They just want to rape women and then disappear.

- Source:

Karen Human Rights Group, July 10, 1993

A village coconut plantations destroyed by Slorc troops

POLITICS

Peace Talks

Since the civil war in Burma started in 1948, various attempts at peace talks have been carried out. In 1963, the Burmese military called for peace talks with the various rebel groups. The military laid down conditions for peace which left no room for compromise. The groups were forced to back away from the peace talks. As a final blow, the military promised safe passage back to their home areas only within a three-day period. As it was impossible for all the groups to reach their homes in the given time, some were attacked and killed along the way. The military then informed the people that they had honestly called for peace with the insurgent groups, but it was these groups who refused to cooperate. This propaganda created more confusion and misunderstanding among the general population of the country. (Background to Peace Talks in Burma, October 1992)

With this experience to look back on, the ethnic nationalities have reason to respond negatively to the demand of Slorc to lay down their arms before peace negotiations can begin. They see such a move as indicating total surrender to the Burmese military. This would leave them in a position from which they could not carry out any negotiations to achieve the rights they have been fighting for for over 40 years. It would, in a sense, be agreeing to servitude.

The ethnic nationalities, as represented by the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), are not opposed to peace negotiations. In a June 1, 1991 position paper on "Internal Peace in Burma", they outlined their views as follows:

It is our position that internal peace is the most important issue facing Burma. Whatever government comes to power, it cannot achieve advancement and make progress unless it is able to end the civil war. If anyone really wants internal peace, then the primary problem, which is a political one, must be solved first. Our position on negotiations are:

L We accept the negotiations in principle.

2. Negotiations should be conducted by the Democratic Alliance of Burma on behalf of all of its member groups.

3. Negotiations should in no way compromise the dignity of the people.

4. Negotiations should be carried out openly by letting the people of Burma and the whole world know.

When negotiations begin:

1. A bilateral cease-fire must be communicated officially.

2. The negotiations must be legally binding to all parties concerned.

3. International observers and the news media should be allowed to cover and report the news and observe the proceedings.

4. The location of the negotiations should be in a neutral country.

5. Before the negotiations begin:

a) Martial Law must be abrogated;

b) All political prisoners must be freed unconditionally.

Burma's present situation can never be improved as long as the civil war and its root causes are not directly confronted and solved. Ethnic tension in Burma has existed for centuries and will not be easy to erase, but without finally exposing the causes of these tensions and openly talking about them, the first fragile steps towards peace can not be started. A new constitution, elections or any other process which does not deal with this reality will simply be another false facade of hope which will again be shattered.

Complex as the process towards true peace in Burma may be, the first step must surely be a nationwide cease-fire. While the national convention in Rangoon may give the pretense of progress, life in the rural areas of Burma seems to be worsening (see Human Rights and Civil War in this issue). A nationwide cease-fire is essential to end the terrible suffering these people have experienced for over 40 years.

With this experience to look back on, the ethnic nationalities have reason to respond negatively to the demand of Slorc to lay down their arms before peace negotiations can begin.

Amidst all of this confusion, is peace actually possible in Burma? While some people in Burma seem to be giving up hope, others continue to have faith that there can be a happy future for all if people within and without the country can focus on the root issues which need to be addressed, and take appropriate action.

One Burmese writer has concluded this way:

The Burmese people have suffered the pains and hurts of a devastating civil war for more than forty years. They have tried their best to resolve the long-standing ethnic problems and lack of general democracy in various ways, ranging from peaceful resistance to armed rebellion. Many Burmese people have sacrificed their bodies, lives, homes, families, friends, careers, studies, businesses, freedom, and normal lifestyle in their long and continuing struggle for self-determination, democracy, and a better way of life. They desperately need the effective help and coordination of international communities, friends, organizations, governments, NGOs and the United Nations to move in with a concerted and maximum effort to bring about genuine peace and reconciliation in Burma, and an end to oppression and injustice. The Burmese people deeply desire to rejoin the international community with dignity, and enjoy the peace and prosperity of other nations." (Background to Peace Talks, in Burma, 1992)

BUDDHISM

Buddhism and Human Rights

The term human rights is very expansive.....The UN has defined it with 29 different articles. We will accept human rights which concur with our culture, religion, tradition and our present phase of economic development. We are believers in the cycle of continuity [reincarnation], so we are not only dealing with the present life. Human rights, we believe, is of a much higher level than that proposed by the UN." (The leader of a Slorc delegation visiting Britain on June 14, 1993, in answer to a BBC correspondent's question concerning human rights in Burma)

Questioning by journalists has further revealed that Slorc adversaries of the UN Declaration of Human Rights can not point out a single one of the 29 articles which they consider to be contrary to Burmese culture, tradition or religion. The enigma of Slorc's specific definition of human rights, therefore, still remains.

Burma, as a predominantly Buddhist country, must rely very much on the Buddhist faith and teachings to define the perimeters of human rights as understood and accepted by the majority of the Burmese people. Most scholars of Buddhism, both inside and outside the country, consider Buddhism to be one of the most democratic religions in the world, and one in which human rights was valued and advocated by Gauthama Buddha himself. The Buddha, in his teachings, described human rights in the form of the specific duties of different groups in society. For example, he taught the five duties of parents, five duties of children, five duties of a teacher, five duties of a pupil, and the ten duties of a ruler. If these duties are seriously practiced by all, human rights, peace and prosperity will flourish in the country.

Slorc officials have recently been portraying themselves as protectors and champions of the Buddhist faith. Every day the Slorc-run television station contributes a fair amount of time showing Slorc officials visiting various temples to pray and offer gifts, or visiting Buddhist monks. In speeches, they also frequently refer to the five duties of teachers, five duties of students, etc., to encourage these groups to abide by the teachings of the Buddha. References to the ten duties of rulers are carefully avoided in Slorc speeches. In several instances, monks who dared to include mention of the ten duties of the rulers in their religious sermons, were intimidated by Slorc officials.

The ten duties of a ruler, as described in the book "What the Buddha Taught" by Venerable Dr. W. Rahula of Sri Lanka, are as follows:

1. Generosity and charity. The ruler should not have a craving and attachment to wealth and property, but should give all away for the welfare of the people.

2. A high moral character. A ruler must at least observe the Five Precepts of the lay person, i.e. 1) not to take life in any form, 2) not to steal, 3) to avoid adultery, 4) to avoid lying, and 5) to avoid drinking alcohol.

3. A ruler must sacrifice everything for the good of the people.

4. A ruler must have honesty and integrity, i.e. must not deceive the people.

5. A ruler must have kindness and gentleness.

6. Austerity in habit. A ruler should lead a simple life and should not indulge in luxury.

7. A ruler must be free from hatred, ill-will, enmity and should not bear a grudge against any person.

8. Non violence. A ruler must not harm anybody, and should always try to promote peace.

9. A ruler must have patience, forbearance, tolerance and understanding,

10. A ruler should not oppose the will of the people.

Burmese students of Buddhism point out that there is no contradiction between the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the ten duties of a ruler as prescribed by the Buddhist faith. In fact, they argue, if Slorc officials truly followed the ten duties of a ruler, the UN Declaration of Human Rights would be fully accepted by the people and rulers of Burma.

The realities in Burma, however, continue to baffle Burmese people and international observers alike. How can a country so steeped in the Buddhist faith have one of the worst human rights records in the world today?

Hundreds of Buddhist monks have been imprisoned, many of whom were forced to disrobe and give up their vows. Others are reported to have died in prison from mistreatment.

The rulers continue to wage their 45-year-old civil war against the ethnic people, ignoring the will of the majority of the population to terminate the civil war and bring national unity to the country. The rulers also continue to build up their military strength despite little to fear from their neighbors. The increase in military hardware and the armed forces is carried out at the expense of the common people who now must try to exist without adequate food, medical care, housing or education.

The rulers have also developed special villages for themselves, such as Thuwunna and Parami in Rangoon, using State funds and facilities for the construction. Special shops have been opened to which only the elite of the junta have access. In these shops they can buy a vast variety of foreign products at subsidized prices.

"It seems that in Burma only the common people are expected to abide by the teachings of the Lord Buddha. The rulers are above all laws," complained one Burmese Buddhist scholar.

In reality, the UN Declaration of Human Rights does not need to be amended to concur with the culture, religion and traditions of Burma. Simply putting to practice the Buddhist principles would insure that the 29 articles it describes would be fully realized by all the people of the country.

BRIEF NEWS ITEMS

Registered Companies

Slorc announced that from April to June, 1993, the registration of 246 companies limited, 22 branch offices of foreign companies and 24 partnership firms were approved. This now brings the totals to 2,594 companies limited, 215 branch offices of foreign companies and 874 partnership firms. (NLM 930701)

Border Area Development

Slorc has used 1,250 million kyats for the border area development program which was started in 1989. This budget was used to construct over 1000 miles of roads, 194 schools, 30 hospitals and 68 dispensaries. (NLM 930625)

Singapore

In mid-June, an economic delegation, led by Mr. Kuok Khoon Ean of Kuok Oils and Grains Pte Ltd, Singapore, visited Burma. They held discussions on a variety of issues, including the construction of hotels, restaurants, tourism and transportation facilities. The team also visited the Deputy Ministers of Mines and discussed matters of mutual interest in mining activities. A variety of other visits were made and possible agreements for economic cooperation discussed. (NLM 9306116) Since the visit to Singapore by Slorc's Secretary 1, Khin Nyunt, a steady stream of Singaporean business people have been visiting Burma to arrange investment possibilities. Singapore is rapidly replacing Thailand as an economic partner with Burma.

China

Slorc signed a joint venture agreement with China on June 7 for 42 river craft worth US$30 million. The agreement calls for China to give Burma an interest-free loan with which to purchase the 42 craft. (BP 930607)

Tourism

Chantrasomthara group, a resort hotel operator in Ranong Thailand, has obtained a license to operate tours to two of Burma's tourist destinations, Victoria Point and Basin Island. The general manager of Chantrasomthara group says that there is a positive attitude towards tourism in Burma because Slorc has developed a clear policy towards the industry in hope of generating a stable income. (TN 930618)

Ethnic Cleansing

Because of the brutality of the Burmese army, hundreds of thousands of people are fleeing Burma said a Thai official. Relocating villages, forced labor, war and other atrocities have created both internally and externally displaced people. Many are in desperate situations. (TN 930624)

Drugs

Southern China is now a major drug market as well as transit route for the narcotics trade. The town of Pingyuan serves as a center and has been under the control of ethnic Yunnanese for over a century. A major military operation against the town resulted in the arrest of 854 people, the seizure of 981 kilos of drugs and 353 assorted weapons. Lin Mingzian, a commander in the ex-Communist Party of Burma, is said to be one of the most important drug traffickers. His connections include being a former Red Guard from China. His army has been officially recognized in Burma under a cease-fire agreement and he is reported to be participating in the National Convention and the drafting of the new constitution of Burma. (FER 930603)

B.U.R.M.A.
P.O. Box 1076
Silom Post Office
Bangkok 10504, Thailand

AIR MAIL

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED