B. U. R. M. A.

BURMA RIGHTS MOVEMENT FOR ACTION

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CONTENTS

2. CIVIL WAR

3. POLITICS

4. SOCIAL ISSUES

Free Fire Zones

5.. SUPPORTIVE ACTIONS

Activists Visit Amoco

6. ECONOMICS

Thai Logging

Road Links

Bangkok Airways

7. HUMAN RIGHTS

Massacre in Karen State

8. NEWS BRIEFS

China

USA

Singapore

Roads

Prostitution

US Ambassador

Hardwoods

While ASEAN States meet to renew their commitment to the "constructive engagement" policy; While Slorc carries on and publicizes their national Convention; While companies around the world flock to Burma to extract the many natural resources put up for sale by the military regime, and; While the UN continues to recognize Slorc as the "Government of Burma" even though they lost the elections in 1990, people in the rural areas of Burma continue to suffer from a war against them which seems to have no end.

This issue of B.U.R.M.A. looks at massacres, free fire zones and a pending dry season military offensive by Slorc which are realities the village people must contend with on a daily basis.

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CIVIL WAR

The civil war in Burma remains critical despite the ongoing national convention held by Slorc to create a new national constitution. The dialogue for a national cease fire between ethnic Kachin rebels and the military regime also seems to have had little effect on ending hostilities as of yet. In fact, Burmese military movements in the Karen State seem to suggest that a new and intensified summer offensive could resume at the end of the present rainy season (end of September).

Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) sources say the Burmese army is reinforcing their troops in areas of border trade zones with Thailand and along the route of the proposed gas pipe line from the Gulf of Martaban to Kanchanaburi province of Thailand. The gas pipe line is part of a plan initiated by the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTTEP). Both Slorc and Thailand want these areas to be secure in order to develop the trade routes and build the gas pipe line unhindered. This will mean moving any ethnic nationality villages out of the area and eliminating any "insurgent" forces operating there.

At the present time an estimate 20,000 Burmese army troops are reported in the Karen State. The KNLA prediction of resumed fighting is based on the Burmese army's heavy artillery reinforcements at its primary front line posts. Motor roads leading to the frontier posts are also being constructed by the Burmese military. These roads facilitate more rapid reinforcement of Slorc troops and supplies into the area. In response, the allied armed dissidents in Karen State are also preparing for their defence.

In what some observers see as not a very strange coincidence, Thailand recently mounted an operation to suppress the smuggling of weapons from Thailand to the Karen areas on its border. Most of these smuggled weapons are meant for the Burmese armed dissident groups as well as the KNLA which is the strongest armed ethnic nationality group in Burma. The Burmese opposition suspects the development of closer cooperation between the Burmese military regime and the Thai government, and this will create a much more serious threat to the Karen and Mon peasants in the area whose struggle for mere survival has gone on for over 40 years.

The Burmese junta's decision to end Thai logging concessions by the end of this year will severely affect the Thai wood industries. Thailand is hoping to convince the Burmese regime to rethink its decision on these contracts. Several special Thai envoys are planning to visit Burma to discuss the logging business. Some Thai sources say that logging business owners are pressuring the Thai government to handle this problem and regain their concessions for them. The Slorc is interested now in exporting wood from sea ports to Singapore and Japan rather than to Thailand through Karen and Mon areas as a way of further isolating and breaking the Karen and Mon people. Thai logging owners are willing to pay a higher price to Slorc for the wood and would be happy to see the ethnic nationalities cut out of the deal entirely. Most Thai logging owners are apparently related in some way to high ranking Thai military officials and perhaps have significant influence over Thai policy towards Burma. This political/economic game directly affects the way Thailand is developing its more positive relationship with Slorc and consequently indirectly encouraging Slorc's upcoming dry season offensive against the Karen and Mon.

Opposition forces are worried about the possibility of the Thai army allowing Slorc troops to use Thai soil for rear attacks on guerrilla strongholds along the border. Even travelling along the Thai-Burma border by opposition groups is becoming more difficult and controlled by Thai authorities compared to several years ago.

Displaced persons are already feeling the pain of this new Thai-Slorc relationship. About 15,000 ethnic Karenni refugees taking refuge in Thailand's Mae Hong Son province have been order by Thai authorities to return to Burma despite the civil war still raging in their area. About 200 Karenni children in primary school would be affected by Thailand's order to move back Reports indicate that, if the people are forced back inside Burma, their new village will be only about one hour walk from Slorc front line troops.

The new constitution which Slorc is pushing through will not deal with the issue of the civil war.

Thailand's foreign minister, Prasong, is also indicating that a change in Thai policy will signal a closer relationship with the Burmese military regime. On July 19, Prasong stated that Thai officials are discussing ways of increase economic and political bilateral cooperation with the Burmese regime. High level official Thai visits to Slorc are also designed to dispel any idea that Thai policies support minorities rebel groups in Burma.

The new constitution which Slorc is pushing through will not deal with the issue of the civil war which is not only Burma's internal problem but also is related to regional economics and politics. Burma obviously needs more international attention to the realities of its ongoing civil war and any regional indirect or direct involvement in the issue.

Sources used in this issue:

BP = Bangkok Post (Thailand, TN = The Nation (Thailand), FEER = Far Eastern Economic Review,

POLITICS

Asean's position, without reference to its policy of constructive engagement with Rangoon, continues to be that Burma must not be isolated, and that every effort must be made to welcome Burma into the international community. Asean countries, especially Thailand and Singapore, have extended invitations for Burmese officials to visit their respective countries for more dialogue and further cooperation. (TN930801)

During the last week of July, Asean nations met in Singapore to discuss regional economic, security and political issues. For the first time in several years, their western dialogue partners, mainly the US, Japan and the EC, seemed more ready to accept the "Asean way". Western criticism of human rights abuses in Asean states and the demand that Asean pressure Burma to release political prisoners and turn power over to the elected government were muted and cautious compared to past years.

This is perhaps the result of a major political campaign launched recently by the military junta of Burma, known as Slorc, to change its international image and protect its iron-fisted control over the 43 million people of the country. Having already joined the Non-Aligned Movement last year, they lobbied hard to be invited to attend this year's Asean meeting in Singapore. Although several Asean nations, especially Malaysia, felt it too risky to invited them at this time, Thailand, which will host the meeting in 1994, has already stated that they will invite Slorc to attend as an observer and this will begin the process of Slorc's eventual entry into the Asean family.

To stress the determination of Thailand to include its military neighbor, considered by many to be one of the worst human rights violators in the world today, into the international community, Thailand's foreign minister, Prasong, will make a visit to Burma sometime in the middle of September. He plans to talk about trade and security issues between the two countries, but is expected to avoid any questions about the continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi or the increased activity of the Burmese military in ethnic nationality areas of the country.

Meanwhile Slorc expanded their campaign in an attempt to woo sympathy and perhaps support from non-government organizations (NGO) in several countries which have been most critical of their heavy-handed rule. A 5-member Slorc delegation visited Australia at the end of July, and went on to England and the USA. They attempted to meet with government officials as well as NGO representatives in all these countries. Although they failed to adequately answer questions concerning the reasons for Aung San Suu Kyi's long detention, or why the Slorc would not accept the results of the 1990 elections, they did invite NGOs to come and work in Burma. It was clear that they were hoping to at least gain tacit acceptance, and perhaps less criticism, from these organizations. One member of the delegation, Ngwe Htun, is reported to be a member of the infamous Slorc Military Intelligence (MI) and the overseas Burmese community in Australia soundly condemned the Australian government for allowing representatives of **"the rogue regime who have gunned down thousands of [Burmese] students, monks, men, women and children"** into Australia. (Human Rights for Burma, Vol 5 No. 4) Public protests against the delegation were also reported in the US, and NGOs visited by the delegation seemed far from happy with the delegation's responses to their questions about human rights in Burma.

There is fear that the international community may be misled by these seemingly positive moves by Slorc. There have been some changes in Burma. Much infrastructure development has taken place in the urban centers, the economy has become more capitalistic (open) in nature, visitors are allowed much more freedom of movement, and Slorc smiles are seem more and more around the world. However, what is happening in Rangoon and Mandalay is not indicative of realities in the rest of the country. It is in the border areas that foreign observers must look before making any judgements about Slorc's commitment to real change for the country. Refugees and displaced people along the Thai/Burma border often complain that delegations and tourists visiting Burma and reporting how improved things are and how Slorc seems to be learning from past mistakes, never visit the border areas were they would hear the stories of

We should not expect a tiger to suddenly change and become a vegetarian.

Slorc's on-going, and often hidden, war against the ethnic nationalities living here. The situation in the distant regions of the country is not improving. In many cases it seems to be getting even worse. (see Civil War in this issue of B.U.R.M.A.) Opposition groups hope that the international community will not focus their attention on what happens in the urban centers of Burma. Although they realize that urban centers are more visible and easier for the west to understand and relate to, they hope that the plight of those whose daily struggle to survive has now gone on for over forty years, will be the significant yardstick for measuring the true realities in Burma today. These opposition groups do not expect Slorc to either learn the lessons from their past, nor become more democratic. Even if they did, would they still have the right to hold power in the country after creating so much suffering for the past 45 years?

One Karen who has spent almost his entire life fighting to protect his land articulated what most displaced persons of Burma would probably say if given a chance. **"We should not expect a tiger to suddenly change and become a vegetarian. A tiger will always remain a tiger."**

SOCIAL ISSUES

A system called the "four cuts" strategy, has been employed by the Burmese military since 1975 to control the rural populations, and to attempt to break all resistance against their rule. The system is designed to cut food supplies, recruits, information and support which local villagers might give the armed resistance. Although little information has filtered to the outside world about how this "four cut" strategy affects the villages, it is perhaps one of the cruelest ways the military uses to destroy the ethnic nationalities.

Free Fire Zones

The policy of creating free fire zones was used extensively by the US during their war in Vietnam. Areas suspected to be enemy strongholds, or which were very difficult to control, were forcefully vacated of all people. Once the area was declared a free fire zone, any person seen in the area, for what ever reason, was considered an enemy and could be shot on sight. The villagers themselves were placed in refugee camps where they spent years living off of food and supplies provided by voluntary organizations. Often they lived within sight of their ancestral lands and houses, but even a brief visit could mean instant death.

Slorc makes use of a very similar free fire zone policy. However, it differs in the fact that displaced persons do not end up in refugee camps where they are taken care of by voluntary agencies, nor is the world as aware of these free fire zones as they were of those created in Vietnam. If the people live in the "camps" established by the Slorc military, they must live in a buffer zone around Slorc military encampments and provide the military with free labor and services. They are not provided food or medicines for survival. When Slorc requires porters to carry supplies into battle zones, or if labor is needed to build fences and buildings or dig trenches, these villagers are forced to "volunteer". Teams of these villagers are even forced to "volunteer" their services to walk ahead of advancing troops in order to detect any mine fields or ambushes. Old people, the sick and even pregnant women are used in this way.

Consequently, rather than live in the buffer zone camps around the military strongholds, thousands of these displaced persons opt to find refuge deep in the jungles were they try to eke out a living off of the food they can collect in the wild. In one area of Papun District, some people moved at least five time from January to June of this year in order to avoid the Burmese military. Since the Burmese military began their program of creating free fire zones in 1975, some villages claim that they have moved at least 50 times. This means that they rarely have sufficient time to clear the jungle and put in a rice crop.

Often their new village sites are within two miles of a Burmese military camp, so they must try to keep their gardens and houses hidden from sight. The tensions of trying to keep hidden while at the same time finding enough food for survival have not abated for the past 20 years.

Malnutrition is a serious problem facing the people. Children are most susceptible, and although there are not many reports of children dying as a direct result of malnutrition, their weakened state makes it much easier for them to contract and die from malaria, dysentery and other common diseases.

All of the villagers talk about terrible treatment at the hands of Slorc soldiers. Two small children watched in horror as their father was beaten to death in front of them. Widows are left to take care of families, and young girls live with the terrible pain of having been raped and beaten. At times people try to sneak back to their old rice fields to collect a small amount of rice grain which might still be there. In many cases, they are spotted by the Burmese military and killed.

(Continued on page 5)

An abandoned village - site of a recent massacre

(SOCIAL ISSUES continued from page 4)

In order to avoid easy detection, villages split up and, in a most untraditional way, one or two families will live in a small cluster of two or three houses. This creates a dilemma since isolated families live without the protection of a larger village, but are less easily found by moving Slorc troops.

The international outcry against such atrocious actions is limited by the fact that these areas are inaccessible to foreign journalists and television cameras. We react most strongly when we see images on our tv screens. Human rights abuses which happen out of our sight remain unprotested for the most part, and this is something military dictators know well.

As Slorc continues its campaign to convince the world that they are developing a process to slowly bring democracy and progress back to Burma, they also continue their campaign of creating free fire zones and ethnic cleansing. It will be most easy for the world's eyes to focus on the political campaigns which they carry out in the urban centers. These urban images will be the ones which reach our television sets and our newspapers.

Yet, as things begin to look more prosperous in Rangoon and Mandalay, will these poor displaced villagers in search of peace and safety be forced to move fifty more times? The world must not forget that, hundreds of miles away from the new department stores, Pepsi beauty contests and the national convention to draw up a new constitution, hundreds of thousands of people hidden away in the jungles still do not even have the right to plant a field of rice, or walk safely through their villages.

Displaced people planting rice in a jungle garden

SUPPORTIVE ACTIONS

Activists Visit Amoco Corporation

On July 13, a delegation of activists visited the Amoco Corporation in Chicago Illinois. Some of the activists are also shareholders in the Amoco company. Amoco has been involved in an oil/gas exploration joint-venture with the Burmese military junta.

The activists requested the meeting following the annual Amoco shareholders meeting which was held on April 27. During the meeting, several shareholders raised concern about the corporation doing business with a military regime which has the reputation of being one of the worst human rights violators in the world today.

Mr. Early and Mr. Lowrie of the Amoco Corp. explained that Amoco is not planning to give up their exploration concession in Burma despite their failure to find significant gas or oil. They are also engaged in testing in a new concession block as well. They admit that if they should find oil or gas, the Burmese regime would share in the profits.

According to the Amoco representatives, the only reason they would pull out of Burma is if the US government placed trade sanctions against the Burmese regime.

Action to urge US President Clinton to place total economic sanctions against Burma is, therefore, extremely urgent and important.

- Source:

Chicago Press Release, July 13, 1993

ECONOMICS

Thai Logging in Burma

A decision by Slorc to end 47 Thai logging concessions in Burma would have a disastrous affect on the Thai wood industries which earns more than US$100 million a year from their logging business in Burma. A recent Slorc statement suggested that the decision came about due to environmental concerns and the rising price of wood on the world market. The Thai logging business owners are pressuring the Thai government to intercede on their behalf with the Burmese military regime so that they may continue logging in Burma.

In response, Slorc indicated that they would rather be interested to have Thai companies invest in the form of wood industry joint ventures in Burma. Thai logging companies are reluctant to accept this strategy as a large number Thai logging companies have already firmly established their own saw mills along the Thai-Burma border. Slorc's second option for Thailand was to have the wood imported into Thailand through sea ports rather than using land roots which pass through areas presently controlled by Karen and Mon forces. Moreover, Slorc said that now it is interested in only selling processed wood rather than logs. The competition for Thailand to get this precious wood is growing as Slorc also intends to sell its wood to Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea.

Prasong and Suthep of the Thai foreign ministry are responsible to deal with the Burmese junta on these kinds of issues. On July 1, Prasong stated that Burma may reopen the concessions if it could find a away to better control its logging business. It was a clear statement that Slorc is concerned about present logging extraction which is in guerrilla-active areas and provides some income for the rebel forces. Slorc wants to have total control over both the areas and the economic activities which happen in them.

A Thai expert said that in the future, logging business ties will go through the Thai government rather than be negotiated directly with Thai private owners's as in previous years. The Thai government also expects that they could gain more profits from the new system.

- Sources:

TN-930702
TN-930707
BP-930713
BP-930705

Thailand, Burma, Laos, China Road Links

The four regional countries are fast developing a plan for the construction of a network of roads to enhance trade and tourism under a regional cooperation plan. The idea for the project was developed several years ago.

Sukanand Co. of Thailand has now signed an agreement with the Burmese junta to construct a 163-kilometer-long road as part of the road link from Chaing Rai of northern Thailand to the border town of Kung Ton in Burma. Sukanand Co. won the project in competition with several other Thai companies who are dealing with the Burmese junta. Construction will cost around 325 million baht and will take at least 18 months to complete. Tolls collected once the road is finished be shared 60:40 between the Burmese junta and the Sukanand Co. for 15 years when the road will be transferred to Burma.

Other road links between Burma, China and Laos have been agreed on in principle. China and Laos also have signed a draft agreement for a detailed study of the road links. The three countries are seeking fund from the Asia Development Bank based in Manila. The road between Burma and China would be very beneficial for China's arms sales to the Burmese junta.

- Sources:

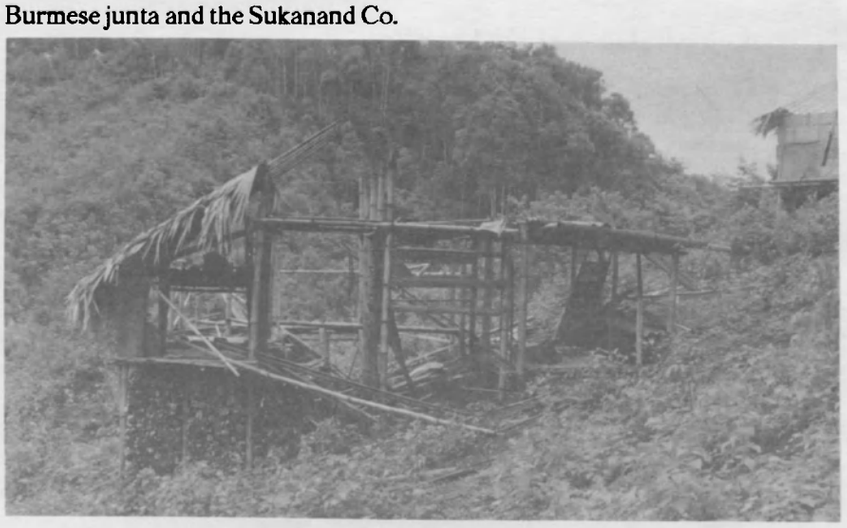
TN-930702
TN-930427
BP-930625
BP-930701

Bangkok Airways to Burma

Bangkok Airways has a plan to begin flights to Pagan and Mandalay in central Burma to help promote tourism to Burma, especially western-oriented tourism. The flight will not be a charter service, but will run on a regularly scheduled service. The first flight will most probably start in November.

- Source:

BP-930715



"Free Fire Zones" and foreign investments. A strange mix in Burma.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights activist in war zones of Burma agree on defining a massacre in civil war zones as, "...any single event in which at least 3 unarmed people are killed". In Burma, massacres continue to take place throughout the border areas despite what appears to be political progress in Rangoon. Hidden from the eyes of the urban populations of Burma and the international community, these massacres are common-place events for the poor peasants who have struggled to survive for more than 45 years under the constant harassment of a military regime bent on eliminating any opposition by any of the ethnic nationalities inhabiting the countryside. As the end of the 1993 monsoon season draws near, Burmese military action in these border areas begins to increase. There are no statistics to tell us exactly how many massacres are already taking place even while the rains continue, but stories filter out of the jungle and they give us an idea what realities the ethnic nationality peasants must constantly contend with.

Massacre in Karen State

On April 25, 1993, 40 soldiers of column No.1 from Burmese Army infantry No. 264 led by Capt. Htay Aung, suddenly entered a Karen tribe village called Thay Baw in Papun District of Karen State. Four innocent people were brutally killed by these soldiers.

The village is made up of about 100 people. The Baptist Christians and the Animists all live peacefully together in the village. All are simple slash and burn farmers living in extremely poor condition since they have been forced to constantly move around the area due to fear persecution by the Burmese army. The village was burnt down once in February of 1981 and then again in December 1987 by the Burmese army.

The two young children who survived the masaccre

The people live near to a Slorc-created "free fire zone" and so these civilians are considered as guerrilla collaborators. This was the main reason the Burmese army carried out the massacre of the innocent civilians.

It was on Sunday and many of the people were in their small temporary bamboo church. Others were in their farms. At about one o'clock, the Burmese army abruptly rushed into the village and at people on sight. The people run out of the village in terror and even some parents were not able to fetch their children to carry them to safety. The children had to manage to escaped themselves.

Unfortunately, two children and two men were captured. Shortly thereafter, the two men were executed in the village and another young girl and a man who were seen in the area were shot dead. The two children managed to escaped from the scene.

A man, Saw Phar Gaw Li, age 43, was taking care of his two ill boys when the soldiers rushed into the village. He was unable to carry his two small boys and was captured by the soldiers. The soldiers separated the two children and Saw Phar Gaw Li. Then they dragged him down from his house to the ground and beat him to death. Later, while the soldiers were cooking their food, the two boys, Saw Gay Mu, 14, and Saw Jerry Hto, managed to escaped.

Later the two boys testified that they saw the soldiers kicking and punching their father and then they dragged him to some other location in the village. Another group of soldiers took them away from the scene.

Another captured man, Saw Gle Mu, 50, was at home. All of his family were at church. After he was captured, he was taken out of the village and beaten to death.

Saw Bo Ahe Khu (a) Ta Dar Si, 45, was shot in the back as he came out of his home. He ran for a short distance and then died shortly after he fell down.

A young girl, Naw lar Mu, 13, was shot dead while she was carrying rice back to her home in the village.

These kinds of massacres are happening regularly in the civil war zones of Burma. Such actions done by the Burmese military are in complete violation of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention of 1949. Preventive measures should urgently be taken by the international body. The following specific points should be used to confront the Slorc to prevent similar tragedies from happening;

1). to abolish all "Free Fire Zones"

2). to separate military targets from civilian targets

3). to consider the people living in the guerrilla-active areas as civilians rather than automatically considering them as rebel collaborators or sympathizers.

4). treatment of civilians in these distant areas must be the same as treatment of people in well-developed areas of the country

- Sources:

Saw Nyi Nyi, KNLA 9

Saw Nyi Lay, Mannerplaw

NEWS BRIEFS

China

Since 1991, Chinese military advisors have been instructing; the Burmese army in the use of fighter planes and anti aircraft weapons. Slorc has sent two groups to China's Sichuang District to take the training. One group is almost finished with the two-year long training program. China has already sold fifteen F7 fighter planes to Slorc.

USA

Five major US-based human rights groups are lobbying their government to block military aid to Thailand since its military still dictates foreign policies such as the "constructive engagement" with Burma. The Asia Resource Center asked, in a letter to Winston Lord, for development and not military aid to Thailand. (BP930716)

Singapore

Eleven Burmese seamen were picked up in Singapore as they attempted to flee to Bangkok for political sanctuary. The seamen had won a wage dispute in Australia with the help of the International Transport Federation which is still holding their unpaid wages. There is evidence that some shipping companies underpay Burmese workers and send the rest of their money to the Burmese military. These seamen stood their ground and were met at the Singapore airport by Burmese agents and taken to Burma. Their fate is unknown. (PB930716)

Roads

The Thai contractor, Sukanand Ltd., has signed a contract with Burma top build the first stages of the Chaing Tung-Tha Khelek road which is part of the link between Thailand, China, Laos and Burma. Tolls on the road will be shared 60:40 between Burma and Sukanand for 15 years when the road will be transferred to Burma. Burmese military and government vehicles will not be charged. (PB930701)

Prostitution

One hundred forty eight girls, many between 15 and 18, were rescued in raids on three brothels behind the immigration office in Thailand's Ranong province. At least 20 were pregnant and some had been beaten and all were kept confined by barbed wire which surrounded the brothel. Police chief inspector Sudjai said there were so many prostitutes in Ranong because it was known as an area where Burmese are allowed to work. He said, "In my opinion, it is disgraceful to let Burmese men frequent Thai prostitutes. Therefore I have been flexible in allowing Burmese prostitutes to work here." (TN930716)

US Ambassador

US president Clinton has ordered a review of a US-Burma policy which recommends sending a US ambassador, the first since 1990 to Rangoon. The policy also suggests exploring ways to impose an arms embargo against Rangoon. Some senators, such as Sen. Moynihan, are apposed to sending an ambassador to Rangoon until more positive changes take place there. Burmese opposition groups agree with this. (FEER930722)

Hardwoods

A US company called Dean Hardwoods, has been importing teak from Burma for years. The president of Dean Hardwoods, rejecting calls for a total economic boycott of Burma, says, "We certainly look forward to the installation of popularly elected government, an end to martial law, and the release of political prisoners [in Burma]. At the same time, there have been warring political factions in Burma for hundreds of years, and we think it is terribly unrealistic for outsiders, however well intentioned, to impose their political will on such people." (Franklin's Insight, 920915) Opposition groups in Burma would inform Dean Hardwoods that investing with Slorc is more of an imposition on the people of Burma than supporting the people's struggle for democracy and human rights.

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