

BURMA ISSUES

DECEMBER, 1993

VOL. 3 NO.12

CONTENTS

2.POLITICS

-Thai logging

3.CIVIL WAR

4.PEACE TALKS

5.HUMAN RIGHTS

-Peace with Justice

6.ECONOMY

-An economy in Chaos

-Kodak in Burma

7.BURMA CAN BE FREED

8.NEWS BRIEFS

- Anti-Drug Seminar
- Human Rights
- Slorc's Snow Job
- US Dele. to Burma



BURMA CAN BE FREED!

A poster which accompanies an exhibition of the same name.

The UN General Assembly:

Deplores the continued violations of human rights in Myanmar [Burma];

Urges the government of Myanmar [Burma] to ensure full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and assembly, and the protection of the rights of persons belonging to ethnic and religious minorities and to put an end to violations of the right to life and integrity of the human being, to the practices of torture, abuse of women, forced labor and to enforced disappearances and summary executions;

(UN General Assembly statement, 931129)

POLITICS

Thai Logging Companies

Earlier in 1993, Slorc announced that all Thai logging concessions along the Thai/Burma border would be canceled by the end of the year. This negatively affected a large number of Thai companies which held a total of 47 concessions stretching from northern Thailand all the way down almost to the southern-most point of Burma. These concessions closely followed the meandering river valleys which demark most of the border area, and fell within territory belonging to several of the ethnic nationality groups struggling for more autonomy within Burma. The logging concessions sold off by Slorc in these areas were seen by many as Slorc's strategy to deprive the ethnic groups living along the border of protective cover, and from their normal existence. They were also, of course, sold off to generate much needed cash for the military regime in their race to expand and upgrade their military machinery.

Burma watchers held differing opinions about why Slorc suddenly decided to end these concessions. Some felt that Slorc was bending to pressure by international environmental groups. Others felt that Slorc was simply playing a game with the Thai companies in order to get more profits from their valuable hard wood forests.

A third opinion was that Slorc was carrying out a much more sinister strategy involving an attempt to pressure the powerful logging companies to sever all ties with ethnic nationality groups living along the border, thus forcing them to either give up their struggle for more autonomy, or at least agree to peace

negotiations with Slorc from a point of serious disadvantage.

A fourth position suggested that Slorc was angry at the Thai government's failure to push out of Thailand the various ethnic and opposition groups taking refuge there and often using Thailand as a bridge to reaching and seeking support from the outside world. People supporting this position felt that Slorc was anxious to see the present Thai government collapse, providing more opportunity for the Thai military to step back in to fill the political void. If Thai logging interests are threatened, they say, people will hold a negative view of the government and bring about political instability. The relationships between the two militaries has always been much smoother than that between the Slorc and Thai government, so a military government in Thailand would make Slorc's goal of establishing uncontested control over Burma much easier and more quickly won. (TN 960630)

As 1993 nears its end, perhaps truth to several of the above theories can be seen emerging. While the Thai government has not collapsed, the Thai policy towards Burma has most certainly changed in favor of Slorc. Several major opposition leaders who are presently in New York to visit the UN General Assembly have been denied visas by the Thai Embassy there so they can not yet return to Thailand. Movement of opposition people within Thailand has become more difficult and several offices of opposition groups have been harassed in recent weeks.

It has been reported that Thai authorities as well as the Thai military have been putting more and more pressure on the Karen, Mon

and Karenni, to agree to a cease fire with Slorc.

While earlier visits by Thai politicians and military leaders seemed to have little affect on Slorc's plan to expel all Thai logging companies from Burmese soil, a sudden change was reported in the middle of December. It was then announced that five Thai logging companies would be allowed to continue their logging as joint ventures with Slorc. Although they would not be allowed to export logs directly, they would rather work with Slorc to produce processed wood for export. Thus Slorc would make a higher profit from their trees and at least some Thai logging companies could continue their business. Several of these logging companies have close connections to either members of the Thai parliament, political parties, or to some high political authorities.

Five of these companies which have already been given permission to set up joint ventures with Slorc are: B & F Enterprise, Chaophya & Irrawaddy, Sirin Technology, Union Par and Thai Pong Saw Mill. Five other companies are presently in the process of negotiating for new deals. They are Chaing Mai B & F, Thaisawat Import/Export, Prathumthani, Mae Sot Forest and Santi Logging. The remaining logging companies may be left out in the cold, suggesting that they do not have sufficient political pull to stay in the game.

Constructive engagement, as being practiced by the ASEAN nations, is definitely having an effect, but almost totally in favor of the Slorc military regime.

□ Source: Manager (Thai) 931214

CIVIL WAR

The civil war in Burma just will not go away. At times it seems to abate slightly and the watching world breathes a sigh of hope that finally it is all over. At times negotiations are announced, peace talks are considered, and hope is again fueled. Yet, for the peasants living in the mountainous areas along Burma's borders, little seems to ever change. For decades they have had to suffer the indignities of military domination, and many of them fear the future carries nothing new and better for them.

How can peace finally come to Burma if the military regime continues to expand its power and demand the right to play a leading political role in Burma's future?

Since 1988, the army has almost doubled in size and continues to grow. It appears that soon they will reach their goal of having a military 500,000 strong. This is twice the size of Thailand's army, and Thailand has a much larger population than Burma.

Why such a large army? Definitely not for protection from external threats. Burma is bordered by Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Laos and China, and other than a few brief skirmishes over where the border lines actually run, there are no serious neighborhood problems which merit such a large army.

The need for such a large military is reflected by the demand of Slorc that any new constitution provide the military with tremendous political power in running the country. The military has had absolute power in Burma for much too long, and now more than anything else, they fear losing that power. Perhaps they fear the retaliation of a people who long ago became fed up with the

military's inept political and economic leadership which has plunged the once prosperous nation into total poverty and chaos. The people of Burma are tired of civil war, tired of poverty, and tired of living with the reputation of being one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. They want nothing more than to have the military simply return to their barracks, and political/economic power be taken over by civilians who have the skill and knowledge to rebuild the country, and re-establish Burma's dignity within the international community.

There is, however, little chance the military will heed this wish of the people, or readily relinquish any of their power. They continue to propagate the notion that it is the military, and the military alone, which has kept the Burmese nation together, and which can continue to do so in the future. Burma's Foreign Minister recently said in a speech to the UN General Assembly, **"The history of the modern Myanmar nation [Burma] is synonymous with the history of the Tatmadaw [military]. Since the time of our struggle for national independence it has been in the forefront of national politics."** U Kyaw Min, Permanent Representative of Burma to the 48th session of the UN General Assembly added, **"The Tatmadaw has always stayed above party politics. But it has always shouldered its primary responsibility of ensuring the non-disintegration of the Union, the non-disintegration of national solidarity and the consolidation of national sovereignty. It will and must continue to do so in the future."** (NLM 931210)

Slorc's approach to "ensuring the non-disintegration of the Union, etc"

must raise much doubt in the minds of the international community about their true commitment to these goals. Their approach is clearly illustrated by the following case.

"On 9 October 1992, four men were captured from their work, bound and taken away by Slorc soldiers. They were tied up to each other. The next day they were saddled with loads and taken to Byat Kauk Slorc camp. They say each of their loads weighed about the same as 2 baskets of rice, or over 100 pounds. The older porters could not carry this weight, so the soldiers kicked them and stomped on them. Along the way they saw 5 dead porters whose loads had been too much to carry. They also saw a 14 year old boy who was trying to catch paddy herons by setting a net. On seeing the boy, one of the soldiers ran to him and stabbed him to death. They also witnessed 4 elderly men hit and killed with rifle butts." (KHRG 931110)

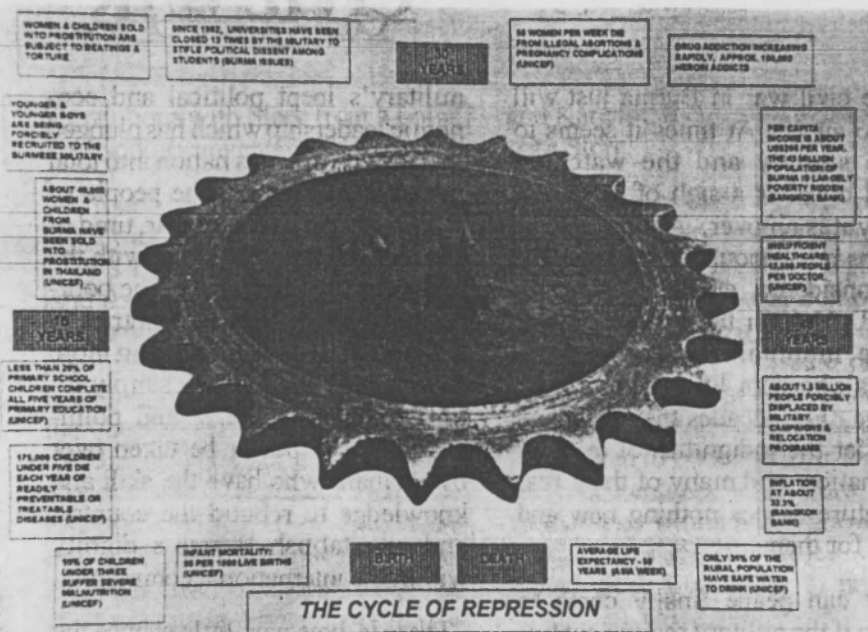
Despite knowledge of these gross violations of human rights, and of the vast corruption of the military regime, the international community still fails to take sufficient action to help move the country towards a true peace. Slorc still sits in the UN General Assembly, an arms embargo has yet to be discussed and brought into action and foreign companies continue to invest, directly and indirectly, with the military providing them the funds they need to expand their power. Over 16% of the country's GDP is now directly spent on the military.

Although the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have apparently not given Burma any new loan commitments since 1987 and 1986 respectively, Slorc can get

some of this money via China. China received over US\$1 billion from the World Bank in 1993. They also received US\$903 million from the Asian Development Bank in 1992. China takes money provided from these loans, and lends it out to Burma in soft loans to build bridges, roads etc. China also has been selling huge amounts of modern weapons to the Slorc and has provided them training in how to use the more sophisticated equipment.

What can be done to finally help end the civil war in Burma? For one thing, China can be pressured, through the UN, to stop its aid to Slorc, especially its military aid and training. Economic sanctions must also be placed on Burma, and companies investing their pressured to pull out.

The military in Burma is deeply entrenched, and will not give up their power easily. Although a new constitution and a new election in 1994 could give the facade of a



The Burmese people live in a cycle of repression, created by the military's ongoing war to dominate them. (taken from a panel in the Burma Can be Freed exhibition)

move towards democracy, the military's war against the rural ethnic peasants will more likely continue unchecked. The civil war in Burma will only end when the military machine which holds such a clutch over

the entire life of the country, is finally dismantled.

○ Sources:
AWSJ 931213)

PEACE TALKS

In response to a recent speech by Slorc leader Khin Nyunt for talks with the opposition, the members of Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) agreed to sit down as a united group to try to work things out with Burma's military regime. The DAB represents a coalition made up of almost all of the various opposition groups.

In a move not surprising to most Burma watchers, the Burmese military regime refused this offer, stating rather that they would only hold meetings with individual armed ethnic groups. The strategy of Slorc has always been to divide the opposition forces so that a united front can not easily be put forward. This places the opposition forces in a position of disadvantage while strengthening the military's ability to manipulate any peace negotiation proceedings.

Slorc has had some success in trying to divide up the opposition for negotiations. Since 1989, ten of the groups have entered ceasefire agreements with Slorc. However, the hope for peace in Burma still rests with a united effort to identify the root causes of the long conflict and seek positive and long term solutions. Individual discussions between the opposition groups and Slorc can only complicate the matter even more, leaving little hope for a proper ceasefire and the end of suffering for Burma's peasant population. (TN931216)

HUMAN RIGHTS

Peace with Justice

On November 17, Slorc Secretary-1, Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt, made a speech in Kayah State in which he called on all armed groups to "return to the legal fold". (NLM 931119) Although some people interpreted this as a call to peace talks, others looked at it as a call to lay down arms, unconditionally surrender and accept Slorc as the "legal fold".

Peace is, of course, a major desire of the people in Burma. But peace with compromise can not be substituted for peace with justice. It would be counterproductive for a peace process to be entered into which could not evolve into a lasting peace providing all the people of Burma with lasting dignity, hope and tranquility.

Although Khin Nyunt's speech might, in a vague sort of way, suggest a call for peace with the ethnic rebel forces, the ongoing human rights abuses in the rural areas points to a totally different sort of reality. This reality must be taken into account if any serious peace talks are to ever be initiated. The following brief stories suggest that peace with justice is still a long way off.

"On August 18, 1993, Slorc launched an operation in Toungoo District which was intended to capture Bu Sah Kee, a Karen trading gateway and headquarters of the Karen National Defence Organization's 4th Brigade. In order to round up sufficient porters to carry out this operation, the Slorc troops went to Baw Galee village. Since all of the villagers fled when they heard the troops approaching, no porters could be recruited. The troops then went to a nearby high school and took all the students and

teachers from the 6 to the 10 grades as porters. About 100 boys and girls, ages 12 to 20, were taken along with their teachers. The Slorc troops forced the students to carry supplies, but one day along the way they encountered Karen troops and fighting began. As a result some of the boys managed to run away. After that, the Slorc troops stopped giving any food to the porters, except a small handful of rice to the smaller school girls. The boys had to cut banana trees to eat the stems when they could. It took 4 or 5 days for them to reach the main Burmese force, and then they let the students and teachers go back." (Karen Human Rights Group 931114)

Daw Kyi Kyi, a 49 year-old woman with 4 children living in Kyauk Kyi Township of Nyaunglebin District, related the following incident.

"A Slorc soldier named Sergeant Ba Kyi and his men captured 9 women from our village and accused them of supporting the Karen Women's Organization. All of them are single.

They were all beaten brutally by Sergeant Ba Kyi. The soldiers burnt off all of Naw Heh Sayt's head hair, and then her pubic hair as well. Sergeant Ba Kya raped her. She was also kicked in the face with army boots 3 times, and a soldier took off his boot and hit her in the face with that 3 times too. They also kicked her hard in the abdomen. Naw San Win was also raped by Sergeant Ba Kyi, hit in the face with an army boot 3 times, and they stabbed her in both thighs with a bayonet.

The other 7 women were not raped, but they were each lashed.

The women were then all tied up and taken away to Toungoo, 60 miles away, where the Slorc threw them in Toungoo Jail. For the first two days in jail, none of them were given any food or water. On the second day, the women's families in the village got a message saying, "If you want your daughters back, submit 10,000 Kyat per head and take them."

Their families managed to raise the money by selling all their livestock and belongings, leaving them with nothing, and then begging money from all their relatives until they had enough. Then they gave the money to the Column Commander, Lt. Myo Tin, but the women were not released. (Karen Human Rights Group 931215)

The process to peace with justice must start with justice for these village peasants hidden far away from the world's attention. Cosmetic political changes in the urban centers, a new constitution, elections and a more open economic system will not necessarily mean an end to the suffering of these peasants. The world must not be deceived by calls for "peace talks" by a military regime which has ruled Burma brutally since 1993 and continues to this day to rape, pillage and murder people living deep in the hinter-lands of Burma.

Peace with justice will not come about by accident. Nor will peace with justice necessarily come about through processes put together in conference rooms or on paper. Peace with justice will come about only when the starting point is these peasants who have suffered so terribly for so long, and who have more of a claim to peace and justice than anyone else.

ECONOMY

An Economy in Chaos

Burma has its own press to print currency. Thus, whenever there is a shortage of cash, they can simply print more. According to one foreign diplomat in Rangoon, the money supply in the country has grown 500% in the last year. But having a pocket full of money does not mean the people are richer. The inflation rate varies from source to source, but the Asian Wall Street Journal reports it to be about 40%.

With little change in salaries, most of this newly printed currency does not find its way to the people. Yet, they must bear the brunt of the inflation hurricane which races through their everyday lives. For example, the price of rice rose about 120% during the past year. Rice is one of the most important food commodities of the Burmese people, and without it they can not survive.

The official exchange rate for the Burmese kyat remains at about 6.1 per US dollar, but money changers in Rangoon who desperately want US dollars will pay up to 120 kyats per dollar which reflects the real value of the Burmese currency.

Foreign investments continue to grow in Burma despite this gap between the official kyat exchange rate and its real market value. Foreign companies must find some way to exchange their kyats in the country for some commodity which they can export at a good profit in order to carry on their business. The Burmese kyat is not accepted anywhere else in the world, so it is useless for foreign companies to carry the kyat out.

Since 1988, a variety of foreign companies have set up joint ventures with Slorc Ministry of Industry-1. These joint ventures help bring in the foreign cash Slorc needs to upgrade its military. Some of these joint-ventures include:

- **-Yangon Garment Manufacturing Co, jointly set up by Myanma Textile Industries and "Value Industries" of Hong Kong.**
- **-Yangon Knit Garment Manufacturing Co, a joint venture between Myanma Textile Industries and Hop-woo Co of Hong Kong.**

- **-Myanmar NC Woodwork Co, a joint venture between Myanma General Industries and NC Woodwork Co of Singapore which produces wooden door frames and parquet flooring.**

- **-Myanmar ACE, a joint venture between Myanmar General Industries and ACE Co of Singapore which produces Aluzinc roofing sheets.**

- **-Myanmar-Singapura United Tobacco Co-Ltd, a joint venture between Myanma Foodstuff Industries, and Singapura United Tobacco Co-Ltd of Singapore. This company produces Duya cigarettes.**

Since being established after 1988, these joint ventures have made profits totalling US\$10.965 million and 228.02 million kyats. Total taxes paid by the companies to the military regime are reported to be 277.465 million kyats.

Kodak Enters Burma

In July of this year, a representative of Kodak Thailand, Narong Jerawankun, said that Kodak was investigating the possibility of expanding into Indochina, especially into Laos, Cambodia and Burma. Since 1992, Kodak was already testing the market in Burma for their film, developing paper and other photographic equipment. The response is reportedly very favorable. (Thai Financial 930713)

Now it has been reported that Kodak has signed a contract to begin opening four Express Color labs in Rangoon. The first is due to open in early 1994. Work on the facilities is presently underway.

The budget for renovation of the buildings to house the four labs will cost Kodak approximately one million Thai baht, while equipment will require an investment of another 4 million baht. After these four labs are operating, Kodak could expand more and set up four more labs in Burma. (Thai Financial, Bangkok Business, Siam Post 931124)

BURMA CAN BE FREED

Burma Issues has just completed an exhibition entitled "Burma Can be Freed". The exhibition is a multimedia kit which focuses on the civil war in Burma and the resulting human rights abuses against the rural peasants. It also contains suggestions for what can be done by international friends to help bring about a lasting peace for the people of Burma.

The exhibition consists of ten 5' by 4' panels which use colorful maps, colored photos, graphics and printed text to help tell the story of the silent war which has been raging in Burma for almost fifty years. Also included in the exhibition are two video tapes. **Faces of Burma** is a collage of photos, music and sounds which brings the viewer face to face with the people of Burma who struggle, survive, suffer and die under the military regime's military campaigns throughout the countryside. This video can be set up within the exhibition area to give exhibition goers a break while viewing the panels, yet keep them deeply involved in the realities of civil war in Burma. It shows the strength of the people, the beauty of Burma as well as the pain and suffering the war brings to the people.



Finishing touches being put on the exhibition panels

The Burma Deception is a professionally-made 37 minute documentary which takes a look at internally and externally displaced persons, and explores how foreign investments contribute to the ongoing civil war which makes it impossible for these displaced persons to return home or to establish any kind of stable existence. This video can easily be used for an evening meeting to further raise awareness of the issues, both internal and international, which need to be addressed for peace to be restored. (TN931216)

An effective way of using the education kit would be to set the exhibition and **Faces of Burma** up in an exhibition hall, shopping mall, university center or church. In the evening, **The Burma Deception** could be shown and Burmese living in the area could be invited to sit on a panel to answer questions or give further information.

It is important that the exhibition and films help lead to more effective action in support of peace and full human rights in Burma.

For information about ordering a copy of the entire kit, or to find out if any organization in your area has already purchased a kit which could be borrowed or rented, contact Burma Issues.



NEWS BRIEFS

Anti-Drug Seminar

In late November of this year, officials from Thailand, China, Vietnam and Laos met in Chiang Mai, Thailand to view satellite photos of regional opium growing areas taken by the French firm Spot Image. The purpose of the meetings was to boost regional cooperation in the fight against the drug trade in Southeast Asia.

Obvious in its absence was Burma. It is speculated that it failed to come out of embarrassment since the largest amount of opium growing in the region is shown by satellite pictures to be areas under the military regime's control. The opium harvest this year is expected to produce about 200 tons of raw heroin, and many people say that it is this heroin that helps pay for much of the expenses in running the military machinery of Burma. (BP931125)

Human Rights

Amnesty International has urged the Burmese government to end torture and political killings in the country, following the presentation of a damning UN report.

"Despite the lifting of some martial law decrees in 1992, severe restrictions on rights to freedom of expression and association, the use of torture, disappearances and political killings are ongoing," Amnesty said. (TN931291)

Slorc's Snow Job

Burmese Tourism Minister Lt Gen Kyaw Ba says that Burma plans to develop ski resorts in the mountains along its northern border as part of a program to build resorts aimed at attracting foreign skiers, trekkers and mountaineers. Burma's northern borders with China and India have many high mountain peaks. One mountain, Khahabo Razi, in northern Kachin state, reaches 5,853

meters and is snow-capped year round. (BP931201)

US Delegation to Burma

US senators Thad Cochran, Hank Brown and Larry Prossler recently visited Burma. Although the purpose of their visit was not made clear, they held meetings with Minister for National Planning and Economic Development Brig-Gen Abel, Director-General of the Foreign Economic Relations Department U Thein Aung Lwin, Director General of the Planning Department U Sang Khup and Director-General of Central Statistics Organization U Sein Tin, suggesting that their visit was probably linked to economic investment interests in Burma. They left Burma on December 9. (NLM931210)

BURMA ISSUES

P.O. Box 1076, Silom Post Office

Bangkok 10504, Thailand

Mark and Jan Siemens
Mennonite Central Committee
39 Soi 19 Sukhumvit
Bangkok 10110
THAILAND

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

AIR MAIL