

BURMA ISSUES

JANUARY, 1994

VOL. 4 NO.1

CONTENTS

2 HUMAN RIGHTS

3 ECONOMICS

Gas Pipeline

4 PRISONERS

5 PEPESI/AMOCO

Shareholder

RESCUE

6 SLAVERY

8 NEWS BRIEFS

Prayer Breakfast

Burma/Bosnia



Fires consume more than people's houses, they also consume the people's faith in the military's true intentions for peace in Burma.

It is now that time of year when the nights get cold and the air is crystal clear. It is also what villagers call "road-building season" - when Slorc once again forces the people at gunpoint to rebuild the military supply roads and sweep them for mines. Those who do not cooperate are being tortured and executed, the weak and sick beaten for not working hard enough, and the women raped with impunity. This is happening now, today, *at this very moment*. Villagers are being forced to do so much slave labor that they have no time left to work in their fields so their children are malnourished and sick. And when the roads are rebuilt once again, the Slorc will just take them to do slave labor at the army camps instead. (Karen Human Rights Group, January 3, 1994)

Information For Action *** International Campaigns For Peace *** Grassroots Education And Organizing

HUMAN RIGHTS

Members of the various ethnic minorities still remain as unidentified political prisoners in the jails of Burma's countryside, although the release of political prisoners from the notorious jails of Rangoon have been much publicized. The release of any political prisoner is, in fact, simply a cosmetic change to impress the international community that positive changes are taking place in Burma.

A total of about 400 innocent civilians are reportedly in the Tavoy prison in Tennasserin Division, accused by Burmese Regiment No. (19) Military Intelligence Unit (MI) of being Karen Rebel sympathizers. Approximately three hundred are actually ethnic Karen. A prisoner recently released from the prison said that an unknown number of prisoners died during the investigation period. Some local people testified that this is the result of the MI's clandestine operation to discover rebel cadres in the region. The accused prisoners are, in fact, innocent farmers or gardeners who went to Tavoy garrison town to sell their farm and garden products. The MI agents also threatened released prisoners to prevent them from making any public statements.

A Karen official, Mahn Nyein Maung, said that the MI agents' massive arbitrary arrests are tactically aimed at scaring the rural people from mingling with any rebel infiltrators coming into the town. The MI's isolation of the rural population from the urban population in the region seems to also be a measure to give the town an image of political stability. The notorious MI operation is carried out behind this cosmetic image.

The MI has been carrying out the clandestine operation since the 1988



Suffering continues despite Slorc's window dressing prisoner releases.

nationwide unarmed uprising. The most notorious MI agents are Capt. Moe Thu, Capt. Soe Moe Naung, and Capt. Aye Naing, all of whom have carried out inhuman tortures of prisoners during interrogation. A number of released detainees became disabled following the torture.

Even in the prison, the MI agents created hatred among the prisoners by forcing senior political prisoners to torture junior prisoners. The MI thus can easily manipulate the prisoners. Even after some of the prisoners are released, they are suspicious of each other. Consequently, serious distrust spreads out among the community that any body can be an informer for the MI. Moreover, the MI often calls on ex-prisoners to inform them of any suspicious activities in the community. Out of fear, the ex-prisoners comply, and thus are highly suspected by the community as MI informers. As a result, some ex-political prisoner abandon their homes and farms and

take refuge in the Karen rebel-controlled area to seek some freedom from their fears. However, even here their lives may be extremely difficult as they have little opportunity to gain an adequate income.

In conclusion, the release of political prisoners is simply a cosmetic change in the country. Behind the scene, various humiliations continue to happen and the issue is kept under wraps. Although the military has attempted to show an improved image to the international community and to the special United Nations Human Rights Rapporteur, undercover human rights violations are happening constantly throughout the country. In reality, no political or social improvements have happened yet in Burma.



ECONOMICS AND REFUGEES

Gas Pipeline

Ye Phyu Township is a small strip of land bounded by the Mataban Gulf on the west and Thaitan territory on the east.

According to an agreement made by Burma/Thai energy officials in 1992, a pipeline to carry gas from the Gulf of Mataban to Thailand will pass through Ye Phyu. Work on the project has already started. Pipes and machinery have been brought in and road construction using human forced labor is in progress. Villagers are also being displaced by this project.

A local source said that the pipeline will start on the shores of the Mataban Gulf, passing through Paungdaw, Kanbawk, Kaung Hmu, In-ta-ya-go and Michaung Hlaung villages, and then enter Thailand at Nat-en-taung village.

In a recent interview, Sgt Soe Mo of Burmese Regiment 409 said, "I spent a week in Nat-en-taung around March 3, 1993 to assist a mission of the Myanmar Oil and Mineral company. Then in April, I served as one of the military guards for two Frenchmen who were visiting Phaungdaw. They also visited Kanbawk and Wa Myauk. During the journey I saw them reading a map of the area. They stayed only two days in the battalion and then left. My battalion commander told us that they had come to study the route of the gas pipeline. One of the Frenchmen spoke English and he said that he had previously been a Lt. Col in the French army. We do not know to which oil enterprise he belonged."

Burmese military activity throughout the area has increased during the

past year. Infantry Regiments 406, 407, 408, 409, and 410 have been brought in to reinforce the units already in place. Regiment 408 is located at Na-en-taung and will be replaced in February. These regiments are changed every three to four months. This is probably to prevent the soldiers from getting too familiar with the situation, or with the villagers living in the area.

The pipeline itself is said to be a project of the Total company which is a conglomerate of French, American and Japanese companies, although there is no real evidence proving who has signed construction contracts. One source in the area claims that construction of the pipeline is being assisted by an Australian engineering company called CMPS&F PTY Limited. A spokesperson for the company denied the claim, saying "We are not involved on a gas pipeline in Southern Burma."

Access into the area is extremely difficult, making data gathering nearly impossible. However, the increased military activity, and the increased flow of refugees to Thailand, suggests that something requiring good security is definitely taking place.

A gas pipeline will mean increased human rights abuses for the people living there, as well as increased environmental damage. A villager from Kanbawk Village said, "I have seen many pieces of pipes and devices of machines and appliances openly put in Phaungdaw village. The road from Kanbawk to Paungdaw has also been made into an all-weather highway. Villagers are forced to work on this road."

Since 1992, villagers in Michaung Hlaung, Shwetapi, Yabu, Lauk Thaing and Hnau Gye have continually faced relocation and forced labor. At least 1,159 villagers finally fled to Thailand to seek refuge. As the pipeline progresses, more refugees will probably head for Thailand to escape a life of total uncertainty.

"Some soldiers from Regiment 409 and 410 told us that this pipeline will pass through our village and so we have to dismantle our temple, but we haven't done it yet. It is more possible that all of our fruit gardens will be destroyed without compensation. Only now we come to know that this pipeline is the main reason." (a villager from Michaung village)

"I arrived in this refugee camp in early 1993. We could no longer stay in our village as it was displaced. The old village will now look like just a semi-forest. Eleven houses were burned down. Before coming here I stayed in the relocation camp. We could go out only in the day time. In forced labor we were asked to do manual labor such as digging ditches for bunkers. The work started from 6 am to 11 am, and again from 1 pm to 4 pm. Among 400 laborers, there were 11 women." (20-year-old refugee woman from Ye Township)

The gas pipeline will perhaps benefit SLORC economically, and Thailand will get much needed gas, but the villagers living along the route of the pipeline can expect only added misery as they are moved from place to place, and forced to labor hours on a project which they do not want.

Source:

KNU, Mergui/Tavoy District



POLITICAL PRISONERS

In mid-1993 a group of Americans including, Donald A. MacDonald, Seymour Halpern, M.C. (ret) NY, and Robert L. Leggett, M.C. (ret) Ca were hosted by SLORC of a visit to Burma. One of their stops was to the infamous Insein Prison in Rangoon which led them to report that Insein is cleaner than many prisons in the US. A visitor's impression, and an inmate's impression of Insein Prison are vastly different as illustrated by the following story told by Saw Winston Htoo (name changed), a Karen Christian, who spent three years as a political prisoner in Insein.

My village is in an area that is completely under SLORC control. We are west of the Sittang River, so Karen troops have almost never been there. I was arrested on October 1, 1989 with some friends. We were coming back after driving some bullocks to a place near the Thailand border so they could be sold. They weren't our bullocks, we were just working for the owner. When the SLORC captured us, I was just 7 miles from my home village. There were 7 of us, but they only caught 5 because the other two ran away. They accused us of having no travel documents, and also because we had one or two magazines which they say are "illegal".

The police transferred our case to the military tribunal at Pegu. We were transferred to Pegu Jail and kept there until one day about 3 months later when they took us to appear in the military court. The judges were 3 army colonels in uniform. The judge asked us to admit our mistakes, and we did because there was no alternative. He said, "Have you made mistakes?", and we said, "Yes, we

have made the mistake of taking bullocks to sell in the KNU area." The judge said, "Yes, this was a mistake. The penalties are 3, 5, or 7 years." We had no chance to explain anything, because the judge said if we prolonged the hearing, our sentences would be increased. Three of my friends were sentenced to 3 years each, and they sentenced me and the old man to 5 years each. The old man died in Insein Prison in 1992.

All five of us were put under the Political Prisoners Act. There are three sections: 17/1, 8/3, and 5J. We were sentenced under sections 7/1 and 8/3. They sent us to Insein Prison on March 29, 1990. At Insein, we were put in Ward 2 Since the 5. I was put in a room 100 feet by 50 feet. There were 140 prisoners in my room. There was hardly room for us too all sleep at the same time.

Many times I saw prisoners being beaten and tortured, usually for stealing, gambling or quarreling. First the guards beat them with a rubber pipe, and then they took them to the gravel path. They've made a gravel path, and they order the victim to crawl along it on his elbows and knees. They follow him with 2 or 3 dogs biting his legs. To escape their biting, the victim tries to crawl back to the cell as fast as he can on the gravel, so he scrapes all the skin off his elbows and legs. I saw them do this at least once or twice a month, especially in hot season, because in hot season it gets very hot and we are all in a very confined area, so there are more quarrels.

When we had fever they never gave us any medicine. If it gets very bad then they send you to the

prison hospital, where many people die. I got fever but I did not want to go to their hospital, because I was afraid of their dirty needles and contagious diseases.

While I was there, about 5 people in my room died. People who finished their sentences were released, but more prisoners always came. Twice in 1992 and 1993 they announced that they were going to release political prisoners, but then they only released those who had no more than 1 or 2 months left of their sentences anyway. Since then, there are still just as many new political prisoners arriving as ever before. Whenever any room is available, more prisoners come in, both political and others. Nothing as all has changed since I first arrived there.

We sometimes heard that foreigners were coming to see the jail and the prisoners' conditions. When this happened, the officials did not show them our wards; they showed them the wing which is used for training jail administration workers. The trainees put on convicts' dress and were presented to them as prisoners. The beds, mosquito nets and blankets that were shown to the foreigners are not for prisoners, they are for jail system trainees. On the beds in the prison hospital, they were only shown those men who had paid 500 kyats or more to bribe the doctor to let them take a rest in the hospital. These men were not really sick. All the real patients had been moved back into the cells with us two or three days ahead. Then after the guests left, they were called back to the hospital. I don't know if any of them got worse or died because of this.

In my room there were 7 monks. All of them were political prisoners, and all had been forced to disrobe. When they were first captured, the soldiers just took their robes and forced them to put on civilian prison clothes. In the prison all of them kept on practicing as monks, and only eating one meal a day, but the guards treated them the same as everyone else. There is a group in the prison which is responsible for keeping all the prisoners' hair cut, but the guards would not allow the monks to shave their heads.

All of the monks had been in Insein since 1991, sentenced under section 5J for signing the monks' boycott petition. There were also 3 senior reverend monks who had refused to disrobe. They were kept all in one cell in a part of the prison separate from us. I heard that a warder said to them, "You can not go on like monks - we treat everyone equally here." So one of the reverend monks said, "If that's so, then let us see you treat your mother and sisters the same way as you treat us."

I was released on October 19, 1993 because I finished my term.

If a man is sentenced by a civil court to 5 years, then he can leave after three and a half. But I was sentenced by a military tribunal, so the 6 months I spent in custody before my trial were not counted towards my sentence, and they held me for 4 years altogether. I was not released as part of any amnesty, but because I had served my whole time. It is the same with all the political prisoners they release.

• Source:

Karen Human Rights Group,
931205

PEPSI AND AMOCO

Shareholder Resolutions

Several shareholders of US companies Pepsi and Amoco have presented shareholder resolutions to the companies, calling for them to withdraw totally from Burma until SLORC ends the civil war and turns power over to a democratically elected government.

Both Amoco and Pepsi have now requested the Division of Corporate Finance of the Securities and Exchange Commission permission to omit these resolutions from their 1994 proxy materials.

Amoco argues that the resolution can be omitted based on the Commission's Rule 14a-9 which prohibits false or misleading statements. The "false or misleading statements" to which they refer include the first sentence of the resolution which refers to SLORC as illegitimate. Amoco bases their claim that this is false or misleading on the fact that "...the United States, as well as scores of other countries and the United Nations, all officially recognize the government of Myanmar."

They go on to say, "...it was the U.S. Department of State, led by the American Embassy in Yangon, which encouraged and assisted Amoco in establishing its operations in Myanmar."

Pepsi argues that "The proposal may be excluded pursuant to Rule 14a-8(c)(7) because it deals with a matter relating to the conduct of the ordinary business operations of the company."

According to the Pepsi statement, "The company manufactures, sells and distributes soft drinks, not guns and ammunition. Absent financial support of the Burmese government or the military by the company, it is inconceivable that the company's business could be linked to a social policy issue such as the human rights violations in Burma."

Both companies make it clear that the results of democratic elections, and the tremendous suffering of people are of less concern to them than their own profits. It is indeed a sad situation when an oppressed people vote, at great risk to their personal safety, for a civilian government

they wish to run their country, and then are snubbed by the government of the most democratic country in the world and its "democracy-loving" economic institutions.

A total boycott of Amoco and Pepsi would encourage these companies to think more seriously about the human and democratic rights of the people of Burma.

WRITE LETTERS

Amoco Corporation
200 East Randolph Drive
Post Office Box 87703
Chicago, IL 60608-0703

PEPSICO
700 Anderson Hill Road
Purchase, NY 10677-1444

Let them know that human rights and the democratic voice of an oppressed people are more important than profits and expansion.

SLAVERY

Slavery is flourishing in Southeast Asia. Burmese women and girls have become a valuable, yet disposable, commodity in Thailand's ruthless sex industry. This is the reality revealed by **A Modern Form of Slavery: Trafficking of Burmese Women and Girls into Brothels in Thailand**, a scathing new study published by Asia Watch and the Women's Rights Project.

The chilling report illustrates the entire cycle of exploitation, from the initial deception to the disorienting --and by no means guaranteed-- release from bondage. Using data gathered during three discreet fact finding trips, the authors clearly document the abuse perpetrated by two corrupt systems. One, controlled by a network of brothel owners and procuring "agents", robs the women's liberty, dignity and health. The other, ruled by pervasive apathy and complicity within Thai law enforcement, denies the victims any decent form of refuge, treatment or protection, let alone legal recourse.

The typical odyssey of oppression begins with the victim's delivery from an ironically safer existence within Burma's war-torn hills. Provoking this descent is an "agent," who essentially sells the women's freedom with promises of opportunity, as in the case of this teenaged Akha girl:

One day two women came to the village while "Par" was on her way to the fields. They talked to her about how much better it would be to live in the city and work...Her father wanted to go along as well, as he was afraid of her being sold, but the two women said it was not necessary and would be a waste of his time. The agent told her that the daughter would be...taking care of children

and would get to go to school. She gave [Par's] father 800 baht (US\$32).

The agents prey on the poverty and naivete of Burma's rural families. In almost all cases, agents transfer money to the girls' friends, families or companions, in the dubious form of a loan or wage advance. Whatever the pretext, the women soon lose touch with their homes, and are told that the initial payment is the basis of a debt to which they are bonded, and which they must now begin to repay by working in a brothel. Though a few are introduced to servitude by short stints as dishwashers or maids, inevitably the pressure to clear the debt-- which they have no way to verify or challenge-- forces them into brothels.

Who can claim to truly understand the degradation that awaits these victims of the Thailand's predatory sex trade? All euphemism aside, once they enter Thai brothels Burmese women are jailed and then raped several times a day for months or years on end, stripped of the right to refusal or self-defense. The debt-bondage is also an act of rape:

"Tin Tin" was held responsible for paying back the 5,000 baht that the owner of the Sanae brothel in Klong Yai had given an agent... She had no idea when she left for Thailand that she had effectively been sold into prostitution until she arrived at the brothel...When she tried to refuse, the owner...told her that with interest, she now owed 10,000 baht and said, "If you want to go home, then you've got to work, or you'll never pay back your debt."

Life inside the brothels is brutal. Beatings, death threats and other forms of torture are common. Sani-

All euphemism aside, once they enter Thai brothels Burmese women are jailed and then raped several times a day for months or years on end, stripped of the right to refusal or self-defense.

tation is poor and health care all but unavailable. Escape is almost always an impossibility: lone women, illegal aliens, unable to speak Thai, often unable to point the direction home, have little realistic chance of survival. "The owner doesn't have to lock us up," explains one woman whose attempted escape was abandoned

Indeed, one of the most discouraging findings is that many women, resigned to their temporary slavery but determined to get home, opt for the quickest way out, embracing the only hope they have within the brothel system: clearing their debt through having sex with as many customers as possible. For most, one day they will be informed that their debt has been cleared, and they are free to leave, no richer and undeniably poorer than when they began. Many women die or disappear before their debt is ever "repaid."

What about the law? After all, prostitution is illegal in Thailand, as are abduction, rape and unlawful confinement. The authors conclude that "Despite clear national and international prohibitions on procurement and trafficking, such practices are not only widespread in Thailand, but in many instances occur with the direct involvement of Thai police or border guards":

"Pyone Pyone" spent three days in Mae Sai...before a uniformed policeman...drove her and twelve other Burmese girls...to a brothel in Bangkok. Their van was not stopped at any of the police checkpoints along the way. When she got to the brothel, Pyone Pyone was told she could not leave. She said she knew there was no way to escape anyway, because all the police in the area knew the policeman who had brought her there.

Some Thai police are also reported to frequent the brothels, apparently using their influence to help themselves. In some cases, police whom the prostitutes have serviced return to the brothel for a "raid," usually during which only the women, not the brothel owners, are arrested.

Sometimes the raid is a brief hiatus in the daily routine of the women; they will return to work shortly. In others, it marks the women's transfer from one sphere of victimization to another. Local jails and the Immigration Detention Center are rife with abuse and neglect. Even deportation, perhaps the best hope for Burmese women determined to see their homes again, is fraught with danger and uncertainty. There is no guarantee that the cycle of abuse will be broken. Merely being 'dropped off at a desolate border offers no security and, predictably, often waiting are more "agents" with their promises of transportation home or better jobs in Thailand.



Women live in constant fear for their children and for themselves.

Does Burma seek to rescue its stolen children from bondage in Thailand? Apparently not, its response to officially repatriated victims of prostitution is generally punitive. In truth, there is no simple homecoming for most of these women, who bear the physical and psychological scars of their oppression, and who quite likely carry the HIV virus. For those who do carry HIV, the debt that was arranged to hold them in servitude also incurs a death sentence.

- 160 pp. Available for \$15 (plus \$2.50 domestic or \$5 overseas shipping) from Publications Department, Human Rights Watch, 485 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6104, USA.



NEWS BRIEFS

Prayer Breakfast

David Abel, a member of the Burmese military regime, is due in Washington DC on February 4. He currently holds the post of minister for planning and finance in the SLORC.

Abel plans to attend a national prayer and breakfast meeting at the Washington Hilton and is expected to make political gains out of the event. It is ironic that Abel, who is a Christian, never attempted to stop his own regime from destroying Christian churches and villages, and from confiscating Christian land in Demoso, Moe Bye, Loikaw and Phruso Townships in 1992-93, but now feels pious enough to come and attend a prayer meeting in the United States.

It is reported that his visit is sponsored by Senator Howell Haflin (D) of Alabama. (NCGUB-USA Office)

Respect for Elections

Sqn Ldr Prasong (Thai Foreign Minister) said Thailand had a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of Cambodia.

"We have our firm policy and we have stated all along that we recognize the elected government in Cambodia as the legitimate government," he said. (TN /12/93)

However, Thailand, along with most other countries around the world, has refused to recognize the results of Burma's 1990 elections in which the National League for Democracy won a landslide victory. Following the elections, the military regime refused to turn over power, yet enjoys being related to by most countries as though they are the legitimate rulers of the country.

Burma/Bosnia

There are today two diametrically opposite ways of looking at

the situation in Burma, and to predict what will happen in this troubled country over the next few years. The Slorc maintains that it has to remain in power to prevent Burma from becoming "another Bosnia." Significantly, Burmese television shows more footage from the conflict in what was Yugoslavia than most other TV networks in the region, and the message is clear: is this what you want?

Another point of view is held by dissidents such as Harn Yawngwe, the son of Burma's first president, Sao Shwe Thaik. Arguing that the legacy of decades of repression and misrule - not democracy or a more open society - is the reason for the present chaos in Bosnia, he says: "Burma will definitely become an Asian Bosnia if Slorc is allowed to continue terrorizing the Burmese people. (Bertil Lintner, TT 940115)

BURMA ISSUES

PO BOX 1076, SILOM POST OFFICE

BANGKOK 10504, THAILAND

RETURN ADDRESS REQUESTED

AIR MAIL