

BURMA ISSUES

FEBRUARY, 1994

VOL. 4 NO.2

CONTENTS

2. POLITICS

Recent Developments
Examining SLORC's
Motives
Scenario for Release?
Implications for
International Action
Conclusions

5. CIVIL WAR

7. HUMAN RIGHTS

Mon and Karen
India/Burma Border
Karen State
Yozo Yokota

8. NEWS BRIEFS

The Wa
Dams
MMAI Holdings Ltd.



Any cease-fire in Burma must result in a process which can truly bring about peace with justice, not simply a brief interlude in the suffering.

Cease-fire talks between the Slorc and some of the ethnic nationalities are now headline news. At the same time, a US congressman has been allowed to visit Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the national convention continues, a new constitution for Burma seems to be a distinct possibility, and more and more foreign companies flow into Rangoon and Mandalay. NGOs, too, are considering the possibility of going into Burma to begin the process of rebuilding.

Is peace truly just around the corner? Although the people of Burma certainly pray so, there are reasons to be cautious. Simply an end to the shooting will not necessarily mean peace for the village peasants. This month Burma Issues explores some of the changes now taking place in Burma.

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

POLITICS

Recent Developments

Valentine's Day 1994 marked peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's first opportunity in nearly five years of house arrest to receive an envoy of the outside world's warm support and recognition. However, the visit by US Congressman Bill Richardson (D-New Mexico) delivered more than the official greetings of the Clinton Administration. Consisting of a UNDP representative from Burma, and New York Times Burma-watcher Phil Shenon, Richardson's delegation also brought to this remarkable woman's doorstep the adoration and solidarity of thousands worldwide. For those who watched Suu Kyi rally and unite Burma's hopes for a democratic future, then personify the hardship of that struggle in a courageous and uncompromising forfeit of her liberty, February's meeting represents an unbroken vote of respect and confidence for her future participation in resolving Burma's strife. The visit highlighted an inescapable truth: Suu Kyi's ongoing detention is both a symbol of the Burmese people's struggle and a crucial part of it.

That the SLORC granted foreigners access to this captive dissident at all is a startling juncture. SLORC may also have impressed many by agreeing to consider authorizing military intelligence strongman Khin Nyunt to engage in "talks" with Suu Kyi, predictably disclaiming intentions of any "political dialogue." Equally startling, however, was the SLORC's subsequent announcement that the leader of the NLD would enjoy no timely release as had recently been speculated. Suu Kyi is scheduled to serve at least one more year from the fifth anniversary of her detention this July.



Human rights abuses continue unabated.

Allowing prominent visitors to its most "subversive" and "dangerous" detractor? Suggesting the possibility of negotiation? Announcing an extended sentence? How can we align these mixed signals, and how might they inform the international movement for human rights in Burma?

Examining SLORC's Motives

Some have lampooned SLORC's paradoxical actions as a political fumble: an act of stupidity rather than cunning; a case study of SLORC's poor judgment in the politics of expediency. Yet, underestimating the powerful regime only serves SLORC, and a further analysis reveals that the junta may be turning the release of Aung San Suu Kyi into an issue it manipulates for ultimate gain. The world should consider a deeper analysis before dismissing-- or embracing-- current events.

To start, one must understand the context of SLORC's human rights dilemma. The regime has an unenviable reputation for atrocious abuse. Among the NGOs that document and attempt to repair the damage, details of this abuse form a frightening, complicated image of a nation seized by the systemic violation of human dignity. It is a nation without a constitution to define or protect the inherent rights and freedoms of its people. Every conceivable form of human rights abuse surfaces in a policy, tactic or event of the military's campaign to control the Burmese people. Rape, torture, execution, forced relocation, slave labor, racial discrimination, war crimes against civilians, genocide: this litany of horrors is SLORC's political currency-- without it, it would wield no power. Terror has proven to be both an effective domestic policy and an embarrassing impediment to meaningful international stature.

Foreign governments and the UN have publicly assailed SLORC's tactics, but have yet to impose any meaningful sanctions, sending a mixed message to Rangoon. The world supports democracy, human rights and civil liberties, respects the voice of the populace as heard in the 1990 election, but chooses to "wait and see" what happens next before alienating the enemy of the people.

Thus, SLORC's and foreign governments' quandaries meet head on. How can the junta reduce the unacceptable image of its abuse without sacrificing the proven and essential effectiveness of its terror? How can foreign governments-- increasingly pushed by NGO, diplomatic and business interests to act decisively on Burma-- maintain a tough pro-democracy, pro-human rights stance without committing to sanctions or diplomatic intervention?

Carefully maneuvering the release of Aung San Suu Kyi may be the answer.

Scenario for Release?

The logic is devious, yet can be persuasively applied. Allowing a prominent visitor renews the focus on Suu Kyi's detention. Threatening to prolong her arrest may conjure public outcry, raising the stakes of her release and pressuring SLORC to commute its sentence. The stage is set for SLORC to either reassert itself as a villain or redefine itself as not-so-bad-after-all. Chances are, it will gladly reap the rewards of the latter. By focusing Burma's human rights problems on one person's freedom, or even on all prisoners of conscience, SLORC gains the opportunity to repent before the eyes of the world.

If misinformed, the press, which has ignored Burma (notable exceptions include Mr. Shenon), can oversimplify the significance of Suu

Kyi's detention and release, refracting to the public that human rights in Burma equals political prisoners jailed after the 1988 uprising. Indeed, this is the emphasis of Amnesty International's widely published "Climate of Fear" report.¹ This is an extremely dangerous equation, for it distracts the world-- and the pressure it can potentially levy on this offensive regime-- from SLORC's overwhelming and severe human rights abuse ravaging civil war zones in much of the country.

By freeing Suu Kyi and other visible dissidents without implications for genuine human rights reform, SLORC will define and "correct" human rights abuse in Burma. In a carefully-leveraged public relations move, SLORC will effectively command its own human rights agenda-- perhaps the last major axis on which international pressure can build (since "apolitical" foreign business interests and "constructive" ASEAN nations wooing SLORC have greatly reduced the country's isolation). "Myanmar's" litany of terror will continue unabated, and the hopes of Burma will once again be silenced by fear.

Of course, releasing Suu Kyi and others could pose a threat to the junta's control of Burmese politics. This was the reason for her arrest and the rationale for her continued detention. But SLORC anticipated this danger long ago, and is well on its way to establishing a constitution that categorically denies Suu Kyi any active leadership role, citing marriage to a foreigner and continuous residence outside Burma as automatic disqualification. Guaranteeing the military's primacy in any new configuration essentially codifies the status quo. At the moment these proposed constitutional traits became known, it was clear that SLORC had accepted the release of Suu Kyi as an inevitable component of its bid for legitimacy.

...the junta may be turning the release of Aung San Suu Kyi into an issue it manipulates for ultimate gain. The world should consider a deeper analysis before dismissing-- or embracing-- current events.

Implications for International Action

How realistic is this explanation of the February paradox? Is it merely the most cynical interpretation available, and therefore a sharp but crooked jab at an unpopular government? It may be pessimistic, but it also reflects the SLORC's own cynical patterns of public manipulation. Indeed, the staged rallies of the Union Solidarity Development Association, in which school children are threatened with failure for not attending, typify the regime's cynicism for democracy and its public relations bravado.

Putting that question aside for the reader to judge, it should be noted that predicting the future correctly is far less important than understanding the present crisis and its implications for international action. What can be done to prevent a cynical theory from becoming unfortunate reality?

For one, it's never too late to expand the dialogue about Burma to recognize that the issue of political and civil rights in urban areas accompanies an issue of devastating civil war in the rest of the country.

Neither the release of one outstanding leader nor tenuous individual cease-fire agreements can transform an abusive military into a human rights-defending instrument of the people. Nor can either of these current trends comprehensively reconcile long-standing territorial and ethnic disputes. In all likelihood, whether the guns on the front line are truly silent or not, SLORC's methods of civil terrorism will remain unchanged—in large cities and tiny villages alike.

Of course, people must continue to advocate for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners in Burma. This is an important agenda—one that must not be owned by the SLORC.

It must be linked to unrelenting advocacy for the democratic and constitutional process, revealing the contemporary National Convention as a farcical SLORC puppet show. All efforts to devise a new constitution must be free of military command. Whatever the convention produces must be publicized and recognized as the product of a corrupt and superficial process.

The outcome of the 1990 election is still relevant, and must remain so as international attention revisits Aung San Suu Kyi. SLORC's tactic of waiting for the world's memory of NLD's historic victories to fade must be thwarted. It may be a good sign that US President Clinton's letter to Suu Kyi mentioned these elections, signaling that other democracies are not entirely ready to forget the past.²

Crucially, SLORC's human rights abuses beyond Rangoon's streets must be brought to light. Accounts of torture, execution, rape and forced labor are all-too-common and easily available. Governments and multilateral bodies must be pressured to hold SLORC accountable for these orchestrated campaigns of

terror, and use this record to reject its claims to legitimate rule.

Economic and arms embargoes are still extremely relevant goals, and must put strict conditions on SLORC deferring to a democratic process of national reconciliation, one which guarantees the rights and legitimate interests of all ethnic groups as members of a single diverse nation.

More than ever before, foreign publics must understand the poignancy of the Burmese struggle. Public education programs must render the struggle in Burma intelligible, meaningful and urgent. We must capture the importance of the moment: a clear opportunity to respond to calls for genuine democratic reform, racial harmony, environmental justice and human rights in a place where dreams of these ideals are sometimes all that sustains human life.

Conclusion

Clearly, there's motion in Burma's stagnant political pools. SLORC may hope that the world sees the country as so distraught that any change at all will be welcomed as progress. However much one wants to see Burma change for the better, allowing SLORC's slick PR work to masquerade as genuine reform does a disservice to the Burmese people's hopes for a better future. Furthermore, permitting the political issues surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi's detention to symbolize the military's bogus attention to human rights, rather than the imprisonment of an entire nation, is itself a dangerous compromise. Doing so delivers concern over human rights—which by definition belong to the international community—into the hands of one of the most offensive violators of those rights operating today.

Thus the international community must take SLORC's cue to begin feeding the future Burma back into public discourse. Pro-democracy and human rights groups can capitalize on the single most vulnerable aspect of SLORC's strategy: depending on uncensored, unrestricted information, including a press that thrives on juxtaposing conflicting views. If SLORC wishes to manage "Myanmar's" emergence onto the contemporary political scene, then NGOs and concerned individuals must work to ensure that Burma is not relegated to the past.

No one seems to understand the danger of this juncture better than Aung San Suu Kyi, whose bright prescience stipulated UN and press attendance at February's historic meeting—ensuring direct access to the international public. She used this access to persistently redirect the issue of human rights away from her own detention and towards the suffering of others. "Whatever they do to me," she said, "I can take it. What's more important is what they are doing to the country... Isolation is not difficult. I know other people have suffered a lot more. People have died."³ Let the world not forget what Aung San Suu Kyi remembers.

• Sources:

¹ Amnesty International, "Myanmar: The Climate of Fear Continues."

² TN 94/02/17

³ BP 94/02/17

CIVIL WAR

The hint of possible peace talks between the Slorc and ethnic armed groups has once again drawn the attention of both internal and international communities to the hostilities taking place in Burma - hostilities which have been raging for more than forty six years now. Many Burma watchers still doubt that the present process can actually bring peace to Burma. The people of Burma themselves remain skeptical, and have noticed that the military regime has changed its overall strategy since reasserting its power following the 1988 popular mass uprising.

Burma has been ruled by the military ever since a group of military leaders calling themselves the "Revolutionary Council" led by Gen. Ne Win, staged a bloodless coup in 1962. During the following 32 years, the military has used several different tactics to control the nation, but the same ruling structure has always existed and the same people still sit on the thrones of power.

The military's clear-cut strategy from 1962 until the present has been to "total elimination of all rivals". This strategy has been assured success by the overall strength and size of the armed forces, and has always focused on armed confrontation as the way to eliminate each and every rival.

Following the 1962 coup, the Revolutionary Council immediately outlawed all political parties as well as student and labor unions. Above ground organizations were banned from carrying out any legal activities and were slowly driven into armed struggle.

At the same time the ethnic groups living along the borders of Burma

had been waging an armed struggle to achieve better autonomy since 1949. The military's "total elimination" strategy left many opposition voices feeling that armed struggle was the only alternative left to them except for minimum underground political opposition. Many people began joining the armed revolution. Some went underground. At that time the military defined this armed rebellion as the most crucial threat to its power.

The military called for peace talks in 1960 and 1963 with all armed resistance groups, but the military's demand was "unconditional surrender". Later, when the talks failed, the military blamed the resistance groups for the failure and intensified military campaigns against them. The strategy was quite successful and methodically pushed the armed resistance groups to the countryside of the eastern Burma border regions.

The nationwide mass unarmed uprising of 1988 brought into clear focus the general dissatisfaction with the military. The participation of ex-Gen. Tin Oo and Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of the late Gen. Aung San (founder of the Burmese military) was prominent during the uprising. These two leaders became a significant threat to the military's internal stability. Even several hundred members of the armed forces joined hands with the masses in the uprising. This critical situation forced the military to take immediate and decisive action to restore its state power before a split in the military could occur.

After violently dealing with the unarmed democratic movement in September of 1988, the military, now called SLORC, began to contemplate a new strategy based on the new situation and on doubts that it

could always rely on its own military forces to keep the people in line.

The realities of 1988 were substantially different from those of 1962. Now the military faced two forms of confrontation. The above ground political confrontation was centered in the urban areas, while another political confrontation was a new alliance of pro-democracy activists and border armed ethnic groups under the banner of the Democracy Alliance of Burma (DAB). Both confrontation groups called for a total end of militarization in Burma. This was a new and much more serious direct threat to SLORC's military power and sovereignty.

Slorc designed a new strategy to meet this new threat. First, the military carefully determined the aims of the DAB. Obviously, the armed pro-democracy activists, particularly members of the DAB, were committed to a total dismantling of militarization in the country. At the same time the original aim of the ethnic armed revolution groups was better autonomy for the ethnic nationalities. The military analyzed the two aims as being somewhat different. The ethnic demand for more autonomy was not deemed an immediate and direct threat to its power. Slorc probably considered that the demands of the armed ethnic groups could be controlled through military campaigns.

Subsequently, the military indicated a willingness to hold peace talks with armed ethnic groups. Again, taking a double advantage of the situation, the military set up a precondition that the talks would be carried out only with individual ethnic armed groups rather than with the unified coalition of ethnic groups represented by the DAB. The military's excuse was that each ethnic

armed group had a different agenda and thus talks would have to be held separately. In fact, the original agenda of all the ethnic groups was the same and called for equality, cultural and identical rights and self-rule within a federal state system. Clearly SLORC feared any talks with a unified opposition, and thus had to seek some strategy to divide them and thus gain the upper hand should any negotiations actually take place.

The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the second strongest member of the DAB, began exploring the possibility of negotiations with Slorc in 1993. In April 1993, the Slorc and the KIO agreed informally to a cease-fire. A formal cease-fire agreement was finally signed on February 24, 1994. The result of this move has been tension between the KIO and the remaining members of the DAB.

The cease-fire agreement with KIO was very beneficial for SLORC's delegation in the UN General Assembly last year. SLORC'S minister of foreign affairs, Ohn Gyaw, did not miss the opportunity to inform the assembly that SLORC'S peace initiatives were resulting in improvements within the country. This was a well-timed move to ward off more international criticism, and to convince the world that progress towards democracy in Burma was being made.

From the beginning the DAB strongly disapproved of any individual groups talking with the Slorc. Following the KIO peace talks, more military pressure as well as some international pressure, fell on the remaining ethnic groups to also hold talks. The Karen National Union (KNU), the strongest armed ethnic group, felt this pressure most severely. Slorc began a massive mobilization of troops around Maner-

plaw which serves as the headquarters of the KNU as well as of the DAB. At the same time Slorc launched a diplomatic campaign to encourage the Thai government to increase pressure on the KNU. Thailand's first response in favor of the Slorc campaign was a threat to close the border, thus cutting off the Karen and other ethnic groups from their lifeline through Thailand. Thailand further warned all Burmese opposition groups about using Thai territory to carry out their political campaigns against Slorc. For the KNU and other opposition groups, Thai territory is a very important door for communicating with the international community and is also important for obtaining crucial medicines and arms.

A DAB meeting was called on January 10 which gave the KNU a mandate to talk with Slorc as a representative of the remaining members of DAB. However, the smaller ethnic armed groups are very concerned that they are left in a very disadvantageous position if they must talk with Slorc individually. Pa-O leader Khun Oakkar recently commented that the Slorc will swallow all the small groups, leaving them with little future. The smaller groups feel that individually they must enter into negotiations with SLORC from a distinct position of disadvantage, whereas, if the groups were to remain united under the DAB banner for negotiations, all groups could equally share the benefits of a cease-fire.

The pro-democracy groups which came to the border after 1988 are also very concerned about the future of their struggle. It is not clear how or when they will also have an opportunity to join talks, or how their political issues will be raised. This unfortunate situation has raised suspicion among the allied groups.

In conclusion, the present situation remains very sensitive. SLORC has succeeded in creating a new strategy whereby it can divide the ethnic groups by demanding to talk with them individually. At the same time it can separate the ethnic rights issues of the minority nationalities from the more urban-centered political struggle.

It is hard to predict if peace can actually come to Burma through this very complex process which is developing now. Undoubtedly, individual peace talks with Slorc is a very risky process. It seems to ensure that the military will be able to continue with its goal to protect and preserve its own power and interests through a "divide and rule" strategy. It only needs to change its strategy from time to time to deal with new realities. The military will continue to be ready and willing to pull the trigger if any threat of any kind confronts its position of power. This, the international community must keep clearly in mind, because continuing international pressure against SLORC is essential if there is to be any hope of the present cease-fire agreements resulting in any hope what so ever of a peaceful future for the ethnic peasants of Burma.

HUMAN RIGHTS

While SLORC may be trying to convince the world that now they believe the issues facing Burma are best solved through political means, they continue their war of harassment, forced labor, rape, forced relocation, extra judicial arrests and executions against the people living in the border regions, far from the eyes of the international community. They do this with the confidence that they will be able to focus international attention on their urban political charades instead of on the border war they have been waging against ethnic nationality groups, a war which has gone on for more than 45 years, and which shows little sign of abating despite hints of cease-fire talks and border area development programs.

Mon and Karen

Since November 1, 1993, local Burmese military in the Tenasserim Division have been continuously conscripting thousands of civilian people from local ethnic Mon, Karen and Tavoyan communities as labor to construct the 110-mile-long Ye-Tavoy railway. During the process of construction, the local SLORC military forces pressed local people into slave labor on the project. Consequently, many of these people have died of exhaustion, many hundreds have fallen ill, and many hundreds more have fled the area to take refuge in the Thai/Burma border area which is under control of some of the armed ethnic opposition groups. A few others have already fled into refugee camps in Thailand.

It is estimated by some villagers who fled the area that SLORC has used more than 2,000 conscripted villagers to clear foliage along the

way, remove natural barriers such as rocks and hills, and to prepare wooden sleepers for the railway. The people are not given any payment and must provide their own food and medicine while being forced to carry out this labor.

- **Source:**

Committee for Publicity People's Struggle in Monland, January 1994

India/Burma Border

Chin villagers living near the India/Burma border continue to suffer various human rights abuses. In August of 1993, scores of innocent Chin villagers were accused of helping soldiers of the Burmese military, desert. As punishment, they were forced to serve SLORC as porters and guides.

In another incident, the SLORC commander of Regiment 89, Col. Thura Sein Win, shot dead U Yan Kho Lin, a religious leader of Phain Lin village. Three other villagers were also executed at the same time. They all had been accused of helping disgruntled SLORC soldiers to defect.

- **Source:**

The All Burma Students' Union, India, January 1994

Karen State

On 25 December 1993, while villagers in the Karen village of Bee Cha, in Ler Mu Lah Township, Mergui/Tavoy District were preparing their Christmas celebration, SLORC troops of 17 Battalion commanded by Maj. Kyaw Kyaw approached the

village. Most of the villagers managed to flee before the troops arrived. The soldiers entered the village and opened fire on the first house they saw which still had people in it. The entire house was riddled with automatic rifle fire and M79 grenades. Naw Weh Ber, age 50 and her son Saw Ko Poh, 27, were killed, while Naw Weh Ber's daughter Naw Mu Sghee, age 12, was severely wounded along with her friend who was visiting the house. Soon after the killings, the SLORC troops captured the village pastor and forced him to bury the bodies at gunpoint. Three military trucks were then brought in from the army camp to loot the village. The soldiers ransacked every house, loaded all the people's belongings on the trucks. Before they left, they scratched in charcoal on the sign in front of the church, "Be careful - next time we'll burn down the village."

- **Source:**

Karen National Union, February 8, 1994

Yozo Yokota

The United Nations special reporter on human rights in Burma, reported to the U.N. Human Rights Commission on February 22 that, "Atrocities are being committed consistently and on a wide scale by the soldiers of the Myanmar [Burma] army against innocent villagers, particularly those belonging to ethnic minorities." The violations include extrajudicial execution, forced labor, rape, forced relocation and confiscation of property. (AP 940222)

NEWS BRIEFS

The Wa

In early 1993, U Saw Lu, chief international adviser for the United Was State Party (UWSP), went to Thailand to solicit technical and material aid from international organizations. The idea was to undertake a feasibility study on replacing poppy cultivation by other crops in zones under Wa control. The plea went unheeded, since special United Nations' bodies like the Drug Control Program (UNDCP) and the Development Program (UNDP) can deal only with official governments, in this case Burma's State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), even though the Was showed that the Burmese junta was diverting aid earmarked for the "Border Areas Development Program" to its own benefit.

• Source:

The Geopolitical Drug Dispatch, January 1994

Dams

ONK Mining and Construction Co, a little-known Thai logging firm with business interests in Burma, has landed a deal with Rangoon for building two hydro-electric dams, roads and a port there, at a combined cost of Bt17.5 billion.

The two dams are at Nam Ruak and Nam Kok, and will have an annual capacity of 25 and 100 megawatt respectively. These sites are in Shan State, the eastern area of Burma bordering Thailand.

According to ONK Mining and Construction, the Electric Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) has agreed in principle to buy the power.

• Source:

TN 940124

MMAI Holdings Ltd.

Miriam Marshall Segal, a wealthy New Yorker, has set up MMAI Holdings Ltd., in Burma,

and invested more than US\$4 million in Burmese ventures, including a shrimp plant, a fishing venture and a cement-bagging facility. It is also negotiating hotel, timber, duty-free, cellular phone, aircraft repair, expatriate housing construction, car dealership and pharmaceutical import ventures. Mrs. Segal signed a joint venture with Gen. Maung Maung (Slorc Minister of Livestock Breeding and Fisheries) for exclusive fishing rights to some one billion square kilometers of deep-water offshore territory. The company, named Myanmar American Fisheries Co., of Mafco, later sublet the right to a Chinese trawling company based in Spain. The Chinese began fishing in October of 1993.

Mrs. Segal is very close to most of the top SLORC leaders, and seems quite ready to defend them against criticism of vast human rights abuses.

• Source:

AWSJ 94012

BURMA ISSUES

P.O. BOX 1076, SILOM POST OFFICE

BANGKOK 10504, THAILAND

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

AIR MAIL