

BURMA ISSUES

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Will Burma's democratic struggle be hindered or encouraged by tourism and assistance from NGOs?

During the past several years, SLORC has been carrying out an aggressive international PR campaign aimed at convincing the world that the events of 1988 can now be put behind us as a process of building democracy in Burma is underway. Although it is true that some of the political issues highlighted during the 1988 uprising are indeed being discussed openly, the civil war in Burma has been raging for more than 45 years and the issues which have created this civil war are not yet in the public forum.

SLORC is opening the door to tourism and international NGOs as a sign of their sincerity at reform. This month Burma Issues questions whether or not this is truly a sign of reform and whether or not the people can benefit from either tourism or the presence of NGOs.

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

HUMAN RIGHTS

Cease-fire talks between SLORC and several of the ethnic opposition groups have raised hopes in some quarters that peace may be a possibility in Burma. Those who view the talks with optimism hope that, after cease-fires can be arranged, talks to solve political issues can be initiated bringing Burma nearer to a democratic future. While the Burmese people in general yearn passionately for peace, many are sceptical about SLORC's conviction to building democracy in Burma, or of ever truly turning power over to a civilian government. This obviously is not the time for international pressure against SLORC to abate. The end to the civil war is far from over. Human rights abuses continue, and the suffering of village people continues. Although their cries for help may now be drowned out by the clamour over possible cease-fires and peace talks, their situation remains as desperate as ever. The world must not lose interest and concern in their stories.

KAREN STATE

Mrs. Htoo Htoo Mo from Myint Kyo Village, Thaton District

I don't even want to talk about the SLORC. I hate talking about them, but I will tell you how they killed my 2 nephews from Htee See Baw village. They were studying in town, and they had just come home to visit their mother in May 1993. Their names were Kyaw Bwe and Kyaw Aye. One day the two boys were just outside the village near the forest. The Karen soldiers had attacked the Burmese and disappeared into the forest, so the Burmese soldiers came and fired their guns all around the village, and shot the two boys dead. Kyaw Bwe and Kyaw Aye didn't know anything, they didn't even know how to run away. But the SLORC couldn't catch any Karen soldiers, so instead they just shot dead 2 innocent boys.

The SLORC also drove everyone out of Htee See Baw Kee village to the Main Htee See Baw village. They didn't even give the villagers enough time to bring all their property, so the villagers left some of their food and other things hidden in the forest. They planned to come back once a week to get things, but

they lost it all because the SLORC soldiers found everything, took what they wanted and destroyed the rest.

Three of my other nephews from Htee See Baw Kee village were also killed brutally by the SLORC troops. They had run away into the forest when the soldiers had come to catch porters, and they were hiding in the forest for 2 weeks. They didn't even know the villagers had been driven out. When they returned to the village without knowing, the soldiers grabbed them right away, forced them to put on Karen army uniforms and shot them. What kind of life is this for villagers in the area where the Burmese control? If you don't escape when they come for porters, then you are taken as a porter. If you escape being taken as a porter and they catch you, you are killed.

My son, Win Myint, was at the farm tending our cattle and buffaloes and they shot him dead. He was 17 years old. My daughter Ma Chit Htoo was killed by a gunshot when she was sleeping in her room. She didn't even have time to hide or take cover. The gunshot hit her in her chest and she couldn't talk to us - she just survived for a couple of

minutes and then she passed away. She was 18 years old.

I almost went mad. I was suffering indescribably, and I can never forget it. Then 2 months later, there were two girls who went to relieve themselves at night, using a candle for light. The SLORC were patrolling, and when they saw the candlelight they fired their guns and shot both girls dead. Their names were Ma Thaung and Ma Peh. Their mother was so miserable and lonely that she didn't even want to live any more. She had only 2 daughters and the SLORC killed them both. She was hysterical for several days. Innocent people like this keep being killed.

• Source

Karen Human Rights Group,
94/02/17

SHAN STATE

A variety of human rights abuses have been reported throughout the Shan State. These include the stealing of villager's food and livestock by SLORC soldiers and the forcing of villagers to plant gardens to feed SLORC troops. More and more SLORC is taking on the image of an occupying army living off of the labour of an oppressed people. This is in direct contrast to the image of national protector which SLORC constantly tries to portray through their television and radio programs and through their newspaper.

Some examples include:

In northern Shan State, Taang Yaan Township, the commander of No. 33 Infantry Regiment forced the villagers of Na-huk village to cultivate 180 acres of corn without payment. This corn was used solely by



The victims of SLORC's hidden war.

SLORC. The villagers were further forced to pay SLORC a total of 25,000 kyats. This is an incredible amount of money for a village to collect when they are barely able to earn enough for their own survival.

In the same village it was reported that the commander of No. 240 Infantry Regiment took ten head of cattle belonging to the villagers. No compensation was paid to the villagers who depend on their livestock for food and labour.

In Nong-leng village of Hsipaw Township, soldiers of No 1 Company, No 243 Battalion staged a raid in order to capture villagers for use as porters. Some of the villagers tried to escape and were shot at by one of the officers. Tsai Panti was seriously wounded. The soldiers made no effort to take care of him, and when it was safe the villagers were finally able to take him to the hospital.

About two hundred soldiers of No 94 Infantry took porters from Won Kung-kaak Village in Laikha Township. One of the porters, Tsai Kyaw Aye was unable to carry the loads which the soldiers forced on him. He was tied to a horse and then dragged at a run through the forest. He was seriously wounded. Tsai Kyaw Aye was only 25 year old.

• **Source:**

Shan Human Rights Foundation

SUPPORT

Due to strong cooperative action, Amoco has withdrawn from Burma! This shows that the people's voice can be heard if united and focused on an issue of justice and human rights. John Seger, Amoco's resident manager in Rangoon, Burma, said the decision to leave was economic. (Chicago Tribune, 940304)

Amoco has admitted that they have spent around US\$115 million in Burma since signing a deal with the country in 1988. They also admit that at least US\$22 million of that total went to SLORC agencies. (Chicago Tribune)

The Coalition for Corporate Withdrawal from Burma, representing human rights, labor and other groups led the Amoco campaign. Now they will turn their focus on Texaco which is apparently planning to invest a further US\$1 billion in Burma to develop production of their offshore gas finds.

For more information, and to become involved in these campaigns to support democracy and human rights in Burma, write to: The Coalition for Corporate Withdrawal from Burma, 711 Atlantic Avenue, Boston, MA 02111, USA.

If you wish to write directly to Texaco, the address is: Mr. Earl R. Johnson, CEO, Texaco Inc., 2000 Westchester Ave, White Plains, New York 10604, USA

ECONOMY

INVESTMENTS DO NOT MEAN PROSPERITY

For the common people, the economy in the country is now much worse than it was before 1988. All of the foreign investments have brought higher expectations to the people but have provided little if any increased income for them. In fact, foreign companies and tourists coming into the country simply cause prices to skyrocket and people have less to eat. (a Rangoon resident)

Many people still question why Burma, which has such vast natural resources, remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Since 1989, foreign investments in the country have also brought millions of dollars into Burma with little positive affect on the common people. There seems to be a hole in the country's economic pocket. Inflation continues to rise, and few if any of the people can easily survive from the earnings of a single job. A teacher, for example, can not meet basic monthly expenses from the meagre salary he or she earns from the school. In order to afford the food needed for the family, the teacher must also moonlight as a private tutor during all free hours. Consequently, the best education available in Burma today is not within the educational institutions, but rather from private tutors. However, these tutors are expensive, so parents who want their children to get a good education, must also moonlight at a variety of other jobs in order to pay the tutorial fees. Many of these jobs must be within the illegal market sector.

In the meantime, SLORC simply keeps printing more and more bank notes to try to fill this pocket with



Burma is still one of the poorest countries in the world.

holes. They take foreign currency from tourists and foreign investors at the legal rate of about 6 kyats per dollar, and then use them at the true market rate of between 100 and 150 kyats per dollar. The profits stay with the military for the purchase of more military equipment and to keep their military forces well paid and thus loyal.

The system seems to work - at least well enough to basically keep people alive, but it can not go on like this forever. A time must come when having a pocket full of cash which has no buying power will push people to the point of explosion once again. The people themselves, will not have much to lose in such an explosion since they are not benefiting from the present system, but foreign investors stand to lose almost everything they have invested for their own quick profits. Yet they continue to fuel an economy which has little if any future, and which is

clearly designed simply for the benefit of a small, elite crowd of corrupt leaders.

ASEAN's constructive engagement policy is based on the possibility of the Burmese economy surviving and strengthening to the point that SLORC can remain indefinitely in power. Thailand, for example, has now made it clear that their foreign policy towards Burma is to recognize SLORC as the legitimate ruler of the country. To make this policy practical, they have put increasing pressure on Burmese opposition groups operating in Thailand to cease activities and/or negotiate with SLORC for cease-fires. At the same time, more and more Thai companies enter Burma to establish business. A large number of these new businesses now focus on the growing tourist sector of Burma.

Frustrating as this position on Burma is to the opposition forces,

the ASEAN constructive engagement policy is at least clear and predictable.

The same can not be said for the relationship between other countries and the military junta of Burma. The United States, for example, has taken a strong position condemning SLORC's barbarous human rights record and their continued detention of opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Yet the United States ranks as one of the highest foreign investors in Burma and the US Embassy in Rangoon encourages joint ventures between US-based companies and SLORC. (see box below) This kind of policy contradiction is difficult for opposition forces to understand. "We see the US as a friend", said one member of the opposition, "but if the US were truly concerned about democratic changes in Burma, they could do more to prove this. A total economic embargo against the military junta would do much to strengthen the democratic movement."

What the international community must clearly understand is that a military dictatorship such as SLORC is not easily moved by words of criticism. In fact, they seem quite immune even to criticism from the United Nations bodies of which they are members. SLORC will only respond to something which hurts them, and at this point their ability to stay in power depends on their ability to keep up a strong military which can hold the people underfoot. They have shown little

interest in true democracy, or in working towards a total solution to the conflicts which have created civil war for over 45 years. Money flowing into the country simply makes this all possible rather than contributing to an improvement in the life of the people.

A Rangoon resident recently stated, "A total economic embargo against Burma would hardly hurt the people. We don't get any benefits from all of the so-called development anyway. Economic sanctions against SLORC would be the greatest show of support for democracy in Burma which the international community can give."

INVESTMENTS IN TOURISM

LP Holding International Co Ltd has signed a hotel management contract with Accor Asia Pacific for a new five-star hotel project in Rangoon. The hotel is scheduled to open in 1996 with an investment of around US\$40 million.

LP is a joint venture of Thai and foreign investors with existing business interests in international trading.

The hotel, called Sofitel Yangon, will have 270 rooms and target tourists as well as businessmen.

Tourism is a growing business for Burma. Fifty thousand tourists are expected to visit the country this year - triple last year's number. (TN 94/01/26

In order to get in on Burma's possible tourist bonanza, the Central Hotels Group of Thailand has signed an agreement with the Minister of Hotels and Tourism Lt-Gen Kyaw Ba to operate a floating hotel at Wadan Jetty of Rangoon Port.

The ship will be a four-star hotel with 132 rooms.

Kyaw Ba said that in 1992 four foreign companies became involved in the hotel business in Burma. In 1993, eight more foreign companies joined in. (NLM 94/01/19)

The number of hotels throughout the country is rapidly increasing as SLORC looks to foreign tourists as a major source of dollars for their military coffers. They are promoting a "Visit Burma Year" to start by the end of 1994. There has been no indication yet that SLORC, or any of the investors, has done a study on the negative impact tourism might bring to Burma. Other than a few jobs, the Burmese people may benefit little, and the culture of the country could suffer seriously if major steps are not taken to prevent the growth of sex tourism which has had such a negative effect on some of Burma's neighbours.

In spite of US Government support for democracy in Burma, the US Department of Commerce has been issuing reports telling companies how to go into business there (as recently as November 1993). The reports, distributed through the US Embassy in Rangoon, condone and even encourage joint-ventures with the SLORC. Please write and ask the Commerce Department to stop distributing such reports. Address: **Mr. Ron Brown, Secretary of Commerce, Department of Commerce, Washington DC 20230, USA.**

• **Source:**

Project Maje

TOURISM

What would be your reaction to a travel brochure which advertised - *Visit our country - a land in political turmoil! Join in street protests and hunger strikes! See rioters and police clash in the streets! Visit our country - a land of instability and change!?* (The Challenge of Tourism, Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism, January 1990)

A strange suggestion for a travel brochure perhaps, but as SLORC opens Burma's door to tourism as a new source of foreign currency, and as international tourist agencies jockey for a first place position in the country's fledgling tourism industry, a brochure of this nature will not be far from the truth. Peace is still far from a reality in Burma and many countries, as well as the United Nations, continue to list Burma as having once of the worst human rights records in the world. What is it that draws tourism to Burma? What is SLORC's intention in encouraging a growth in this industry, an industry which the military for many decades has tried to suppress and control? And should tourism be encouraged at this time in a country where the democratic movement continues to be put down?

Some international human rights organizations would argue that tourism can be good for a country where military oppression is rampant. They argue that the presence of foreigners makes it more difficult for a dictator to carry out overt suppression of the people, and that these foreign visitors also provide encouragement and boldness to a democracy movement which must constantly face the threat of arrest and isolation from the eyes of the world. Foreign visitors can also be a channel for information to be brought in

and out of the country, thus supporting the movement and helping link it with efforts for democracy and human rights being conducted outside of the country.

In response to this argument, the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism, cited above, goes on to say, "Few tourists travelling around the world want to be bothered with political upheavals during their week or two of rest and relaxation. They want to see the sights, tan themselves on the beach and do their shopping without having to be bothered by social and political issues."

Burmese political opposition groups still hold to the view that tourism to Burma holds more negative implications than potential positive benefits to the people. Three major arguments are put forward:

1. The cost of a tourist visiting Burma is high. While they receive an exchange rate based on the legal rate of around 6 kyats per dollar, they must spend it at the market rate of 100 to 150 kyats per dollar, making their purchases extremely expensive. At the same time, most hotels and transportation costs must be paid in US dollars. With expenses so high, the majority of the tourists will probably be more monied travellers who want a comfortable, good time with visits to a few pagodas and some good shopping sprees. SLORC will keep them far from any indication of political instability or military oppression, so there is little chance that they can serve as a good information channel for the democratic movement. The few politically aware tourists who do visit the country will probably be carefully watched by SLORC's extensive MI (military intelligence) network.

2. Money which is generated by tourism, will probably provide few if any benefits for the people of the country. While a few jobs in hotels and guide agencies may offer an income to some privileged people, the majority of the income will benefit SLORC which needs ever increasing amounts of money to keep its growing military machine equipped and loyal. At this point, tourism of any sort will most likely help feed this vast military machine.

3. The democratic movement is concerned that tourism to Burma will divert the attention of the urban people away from the need for ongoing democratic struggle. With the hope of getting one of the potential jobs the tourist business will bring to the urban centres, and with a flood of foreign visitors giving a feeling of more "democratic space", urban populations may be lulled into passiveness and the feeling that "things are improving", thus prolonging the struggle for much needed changes. One must never forget that calm in the urban centres does not mean the distant rural populations are also experiencing a sense of peace. Human rights abuses have always been far more brutal in these villages, and can continue unabated despite urban changes and "improvements".

Any group thinking of becoming involved in tourism in Burma would do well to discuss the pros and cons carefully with various opposition groups. If tourism is to serve as a support for the advancement of human rights and democracy in Burma, than it must be coordinated very carefully with the strategies and actions of the opposition. Acting alone, in any way, can only serve to create further confusion within the democratic struggle, and this will further benefit SLORC.

SOCIAL ISSUES

NGO'S AND BURMA

Among the recent changes in SLORC policy has been the active pursuit of foreign aid from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Neglected for decades, Burma's economic, educational and health service systems have landed the country on the UN's "least developed" list. Available statistical indicators of human well-being, including life expectancy, average income and infant mortality, underscore the reality of this crisis. Equally urgent for SLORC, however, is the legitimization and positive exposure provided by relationships to foreign aid agencies, and salvation from an association with squalor.

The unprecedented opportunity for foreign assistance leads to a complicated debate over whether NGOs should enter Burma. Is SLORC sincerely seeking foreign aid on behalf of the Burmese people? Will NGOs merely lend credibility to an abusive regime? Will international aid bolster or obstruct the struggling Burmese democracy and human rights movements? The controversy turns on a single difficult question: Who **really** stands to gain from NGO involvement in Burma?

As one observer sees it, NGOs may take sides according to how they forecast the future. If the democracy movement is destined to obscurity and today's cease fire agreements will tone down the outright domestic warfare, then delaying aid negotiations with the SLORC is simply costing innocent people's lives. Also, NGOs that enter Burma now will get a crucial first foot in the door of a hitherto untramped country--an important motivator in the competitive arena of international aid. The time has come to accept that

SLORC has sovereignty over the nation.

Raising the other hand are those who believe the SLORC is capable of imminent capitulation (if not collapse), potentially yielding to a less brutal and more participatory government. Because the future will naturally give way to democratic reform, temporary abstinence will serve the Burmese people better in the long run, because it will expedite the arrival of much-needed political reform.

How these differing perspectives shape arguments within the boardrooms of international NGOs depends as much on internal and global politics as on any sincere assessment of Burma's civil crisis. It is no secret that many international NGOs are by their very nature donor-driven, often venturing into new countries and fields simply because funding is available. The larger the organization, the greater the likelihood that the most influential donors are governments, who by their own nature link aid to state policy. Thus, to varying extents humanitarian aid is often a reaction fuelled by economic opportunity and official state policy.

Given the variety of interests concerned, perhaps the best position an NGO can take is critical self-awareness, analysing its true motivation for wishing to enter Burma.

If concern for millions of people living without adequate access to health care, for example, compels organizations to enter Burma, then NGOs should assess pragmatically the capacities and constraints of their work. They must be prepared to admit that, though altruistic and commendable in purpose, aid can have subtle or even blatant negative

effects on target populations. Any measures taken in earnest to minimize the negative would reinforce any humanitarian mission.

If, however, NGOs find that they are motivated by other concerns--such as competition, another shaded country on the annual report's map, or an ulterior donor agenda-- then they must honestly consider their ability to work for the good of the Burmese people.

In any case, NGOs operating in Burma will be faced with the pervasive and unrelenting role of the military and military intelligence in daily life. NGOs should be aware that, in all likelihood, and based on previous experience:

--Locally-hired staff will be the subject of military surveillance, will be routinely interrogated and coached about their contact with foreigners;

--Locally-hired staff may be military intelligence informers planted to report on NGO and citizens' activities and attitudes;

--Citizens' groups, cooperatives or any form of democratic, self-directing social organization encouraged by development projects will be compromised by the unrelenting role of martial law and repression of civil liberty;

--The military can not be trusted to coordinate medical or other material supplies for civilian use;

--Manual labour organized by government agencies may be treated as slave labour, with the money designated to pay them diverted to other interests;

(continued on page 8)

(continued from page 7)

--Photo-opportunities, official ceremonies, and public relations events will be organized to publicize the cooperation of NGOs with the SLORC for use in international legitimacy campaigns;

To negotiate with an oppressive regime, sign its contracts and shake its leaders hands recognizes its sovereignty over Burma's land and people.

For those organizations with the courage and skill to bargain tirelessly for unlimited access to the country's devastated civil war zones, unhindered control of their projects, and the freedom to serve the people without the tatmadaw's interference, partnership with SLORC may bear fruit for some of the junta's many victims.

For others, whose humanitarian aspirations are compromised to the point that they directly support and glorify SLORC, widespread, lasting benefits of the aid they offer may be very hard to find.

NEWS BRIEFS

PUBLICATION

A new report is available from Project Maje: "**A Swamp Full of Lilies**". The report documents human rights violations committed against the people of Burma by units and personnel of Burma's army from 1992 to 1993. The report is a useful tool for monitoring the current human rights situation, and holding the army accountable for its actions.

Well written and organized, the report is not easy reading simply because it once again highlights the terrible suffering the people of Burma must live with every day and every night.

It can be ordered from: Project Maje, 14 Dartmouth Rd, Cranford NJ 07016, USA. The cost is US\$5.00, and checks should be made out to Edith T. Mirante.

SELLING BURMA BY TV

The TV phone-in shopping channel in the USA, Home Shopping Network, purchased large quantities of rubies in Burma, and has been constantly promoting and selling these Burmese rubies on TV for some months. Please write to them and tell them why you think selling the gems of SLORC is not acceptable. The address is: Ms. Elaine Walsh, Director, Member Services, Home Shopping Network, PO Box 9090, Clearwater FL 34618-9090, USA.

• Source

Project Maje

BURMA ISSUES

PO BOX 1076, SILOM POST OFFICE

BANGKOK 10504, THAILAND

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

AIR MAIL