

BURMA ISSUES

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ASEAN



The Burmese army is nearing 400,000 in strength. Its presence affects every moment of the life of the people.

Despite much heralded cease-fires with several of the ethnic groups, the SLORC military continues to hold a heavy hand over the people of Burma. Reports of forced labor, often referred to as "slave labor" continue to surface as villagers from the Ye/Tavoy area move towards the Thai/Burma border to seek refuge. Peace will not come easily to Burma. "Constructive engagement" brings little hope for relief since it fails to respond to the real issues the people of Burma are struggling with.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Forced Labor

Reports from inside Burma indicate that the Burmese army has been forcing thousands of local people to build a 160 km long rail road in southern Burma since the beginning of November 1993. The rail road links the two garrison towns of Ye in Mon State and Tavoy in the Tannasserin Division. Maj-Gen. Maung Hla, commander of SLORC's South-Eastern Military command, is in charge of this area.

Local ethnic guerrillas say that the construction of the rail road is primarily to be used for massive military transportation, as revolutionary forces are very active in the area. When the rail road is completed, the SLORC will be ready to carry out extensive counter insurgency operations throughout the area.

At the present time, the SLORC is nervous about security for the proposed gas pipeline which will cross this area and enter Thailand. Several large companies, including PTTEP of Thailand, TOTAL of France, UNOCAL of the USA, and MOGE of Burma are involved in this pipe line project. (See details in B.U.R.M.A. Vol 3 Number 4, April 1993 Page 4, "Oil Investment in Burma"). People from four townships along the route of the rail road are regularly conscripted to work as "voluntary" laborers on the project. The majority of the people in the area are farmers and fishermen. According to the testimonies of local people, the total number of conscripted village laborers is between 20-30,000. The age of most conscripted laborers is between 16 to 60 and includes both male and female. Five labor camps have been established along the rail line, each housing at least 1,000 people at a time.

The army issued an order that the local people must assign one person from each family to always be at the work site. They must carry their own food during working days and receive no wages. A few wealthy families hire members from poor families to work for them, but most of the people are poor farmers and can not afford to pay for help. Head men from the villages are responsible to deliver the required number of workers to the work site where about 800 heavily armed soldiers patrol to protect the rail line from sabotage by the guerrillas. The army even threatened that if any faults in the work are discovered, the head of the village responsible will be punished.

Traditional farming methods rely on the men in the family who can better carry out the physically demanding tasks of tilling the soil and harvesting the crops. Conscription for these work details, therefore, has an especially negative effect on small families or families who have only one male member. When the men are at the work site, the remaining family members find it extremely difficult to work the farms and grow the necessary food. When the men return, the women are expected to replace them at the work site unless they have children over 16 years of age who can do the work. The one threat constantly hanging over the villagers' heads is the army's clear order that one person from each family must always be at the work site until the task is finally completed. The villagers are unaware what the target date for completion of the rail road is.

The army prohibits journalists from visiting the area except for military correspondents. When the military correspondents take pictures,

the people are required to smile. Moreover, the people are ordered to sing national songs at the end of the day as they return to camp. The military correspondents record all these concocted scenes to show on the public media.

The health care system is very poor - there is no water, no sanitation, and inadequate medicine. Some villagers have reported that each villager must also pay 3,000 kyats for health insurance and medical fees. The very poor farmers who do not have extra cash, must sell their lands or their livestock in order to get the necessary money.

The army sometimes sends several civilian and military doctors to the work site to take care of the people. Whoever is sick must first see the civilian doctor. If the civilian doctor suggests that the patient should be given sick leave, the patient must then go to the military doctor. The army doctor will double check the person's condition before giving the villager the right to break several days from work. To get sick leave, villagers must be extremely sick and weak.

One farmer who escaped said, "We are farmers and are used to hard work almost every single day on the farm, but this is the hardest work ever in our lives". The average work day is 11 hours.

The ethnic Mon guerrillas claim that already about 200 families have fled from villages in the area and arrived in the refugees camps. An ethnic Karen eyewitness said groups of Karen are fleeing from the area and are seeking refuge in the Karen controlled area. At present, there are about 500 arrivals. Some eyewitness also claim that at least 10 people have already died from sick-

ness on the project, but the exact number of deaths has not been exposed yet.

Foreign investors always insist that their investments will improve the living conditions of the people, and help bring democracy to Burma. The reality is that thousands of people are suffering at work sites designed to provide infrastructure support for these investment projects. Hundreds more have become refugees in neighboring countries or displace persons in the jungle. An improvement in life is no longer a part of their dream.

- Source:

Local Personnel

INTER-KYO

Maung Aye

The following is an interview given by Maung Aye, a 28-year-old farmer from Ye Pyu Township. His story is similar to that told by many other villagers who are fleeing to the Thai/Burma border to escape being forced by SLORC to work on the Ye/Tavoy rail road.

"I arrived here a couple of months ago. I came because the soldiers are shooting at people around my village. I can't bear to live there now. When I was there I had to work on the railway for 15 days at a time and they fed us nothing. We had already run out of food, so we asked to go home but they wouldn't let us. So we asked them for food but they refused to give us any and shot at us. Twenty-six people were shot after stealing food from the soldiers. They were shot on the railway around Nat Gyi Sein village in Ye Township.

Then, when we got back to our village, the soldiers came and called us to go back to work again, but we didn't dare go back, so the soldiers

beat many villagers. No one wanted to go back to the work site because they can't get any food there. The soldiers took many people to the railway by force and they fed them nothing. When the soldiers were around the village that time, I was hiding in the bushes. Then when they left to go back to their camp, I ran away and came here. I just kept running, because I knew the way.

My family was unable to follow. Then the soldiers came to my house and poked my wife in the side with a rifle butt. They kicked her hard in the stomach, and she vomited blood. Then they kicked my baby son down into the fire, and all the hair on his head was burnt. They slapped my 7-year old son in the face and he cried out. They beat them because I had escaped.

I worked at the railway three times. Each time was 15 days with no time off. After 15 days on the railway, I had only 3 days back in the village before going again. I saw over 4,000 people working altogether, including so many women, and also pregnant women and a few children. The youngest was 14, and there were old people over 50 and up to 60 years old. We all had to do the same work together. At night we slept on the ground. There were always soldiers around.

Some women were raped, including a woman named Ma Thein Myint from our village. When the officer raped her she was screaming, and they shot her to death. She was 21 years old, and she was my cousin. She was raped by a Lieutenant Colonel named Thaun Myint. My farther tried to report it, but the officer he had to report it to was the same one who raped her, so it was just ignored and no action was taken. I also heard that they raped two women from another village, then killed them by stabbing them with a knife."

Nai Win Aung

Nai Win Aung is a 27-year old Mon farmer. He is married and has a child of two years. His home is in Ye Pyu Township.

We came to this refugee camp because of our problems with the railway. We were forced to work on the railway, we weren't paid and they didn't give us any food so we couldn't provide for our family.

This year we had a very bad harvest because the dam broke and flooded our fields. Then the SLORC took part of our crop and we didn't have enough. We must sell 14 baskets of paddy per acre to them at government price - if market price is 250 kyats for one basket, then government price is only 170 kyats. This year we couldn't even sell them the full quota they demanded. We had finished harvesting in December and were preparing to plant other crops when the SLORC came to get people for the railway. I had to go 3 times, sometimes for one week and sometimes for 15 days. While I was working there, my wife and child had to provide for themselves as much as they could. It was very hard for us to solve this problem.

There were always soldiers around. Some just guarded us, and some told us what to do. They didn't do any work, they just walked around and gave us orders.

- Source:

Karen Human Rights Group
940413

SOCIAL ISSUES

The Dark Side of Development

Lubricating SLORC's cease fire negotiations with Burma's rebellious ethnic minorities has been the promise of development for their lands and peoples. As more anti-Rangoon groups are lured or chased to the bargaining table, "development" will become a central item of dialogue. Before the rush to "develop" takes off, however, Burma-watchers should examine the implications of this tenuous murky concept.

Development means many things to many people, but in the realm of poverty alleviation it usually implies people's progression from relative poverty to relative wealth, managed by some form of external assistance. However, one's expectations of what development should and could be are very often confounded by what development turns out to be. For donors, governments and investors, development has an unassailably positive ring to it, but for poor people around the world who have witnessed their independence and economic security eroded by international aid, development has a much more ominous connotation.

Too often the partisan politics and financial interests of those in power contort development into a superficially altruistic con game, where the only real losers are the poor themselves. While international NGOs have had some success in community-level development work, often satisfying and promoting the interests of the poor, there are other--more powerful--players in the international development game. Burma's ethnic minorities, who have long suffered under negligent and abusive administrative efforts by Rangoon, should be extremely

careful about becoming the targets of government-coordinated development schemes.

others to seek only assistance that they deem appropriate and desirable for their people and themselves.

Development means many things to many people, but in the realm of poverty alleviation it usually implies people's progression from relative poverty to relative wealth, managed by some form of external assistance.

Communities are most vulnerable to manipulative development when governments act as mediators between moneyed aid agencies-- such as the World Bank, IMF, UNDP or bilateral agencies such as USAID or England's ODA-- and a "target" population. Negotiations take place between outsiders ignorant of people's struggles and elite bureaucrats who are often equally ignorant or blatantly callous to average people's concerns. Usually, high level bureaucrats responsible for administering foreign aid have much more in common with northern donors than with the poor in their own countries, often holding multiple college degrees and living privileged urban lives. Sometimes the result is merely moronic-- lots of money is wasted and the poor neither suffer nor benefit. But other times development is clearly detrimental to ordinary people's own aspirations for self improvement, resulting in **measurable reduction in the standard of living, quality of life and a measurable increase in abuse and denial of fundamental rights and freedoms.**

The only way to counter the exclusivity and danger of this aid is for communities to begin educating themselves about the dangers of expensive development projects and define with their own values how they would like to change, if at all. As neighbors discuss and debate the most important issues for their communities, they must also unite with

Conscious of the dangers of large-scale international aid in any situation, and aware of the dangers of government oppression in Burma, international aid organizations should consider laying a pre-development foundation in communities at risk. This activity might include community work in:

- Training in community organizing, social analysis and representation
- Teaching relevant human rights concepts, such as the rights of peoples, indigenous peoples' rights, civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights as defined in various international documents.
- Presenting case studies of international aid that has harmed, rather than benefitted poor people
- The role of education in both oppressing minority populations and liberating them from majority domination
- Strategies for peaceful resistance to social oppression

ECONOMICS

Unocal and Total

Concern continues to grow in many quarters about the gas pipeline which is to be constructed from the Martaban/Yadana gas fields in the Gulf of Martaban (Burma) through areas of Burma occupied by Mon and Karen ethnic groups and on into Thailand. A road and rail line being constructed from Ye to Tavoy, probably for the purpose of moving troops and supplies needed to protect the pipeline, is already making use of much forced labor, and has caused the displacement of a large number of villagers living near it.

One of the major operators in this project is Unocal of the USA. Unocal is already the largest foreign investor in Thailand, and is presently exploring for oil and gas in Thailand, Indonesia, Syria, Yemen, Burma and Trinidad. It is also the largest holder of petroleum and gas reserves in Thailand.

In partnership with Total of France, Unocal holds 47.5 interest in the 26,140 square kilometre Gulf of Martaban project. If the project goes through, most of the gas produced in this concession will flow to Thailand which is in desperate need of energy to fuel its rapidly growing industrialization. With a 19% annual increase in electricity demand, The Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) has been campaigning for the Martaban project since 1988. The PTT is backed by the Thai military.

In 1991 the PTT itself was interested in taking on the project, but their request for a loan was rejected by the World Bank and they were criticized for "acting as a front for SLORC". The World Bank went on to say that it, "like most other international organizations, does not rec-

ognize the present regime in Rangoon. We also don't look favorably on applications for extended and soft loans by others on its behalf."

The actual pipeline route apparently will begin its on-shore portion at the Heinze Channel and proceed to a pass known as Nat En Taung. At least one Thai gas run electricity generating plant in Ratburi Province will make use of the gas.

Both Unocal and Total claim that they are not involved in the politics of Burma, and are only providing an investment which will benefit the people of that country. Joseph Daniel, Total's vice-president for corporate communications said that Total "sticks to its fundamental principle of not interfering with local-national political affairs in the countries where the company is involved." Yet it is internationally known that Burma is engaged in an ethnic and political struggle which has not yet been brought to a positive and constructive end. In 1991, elections were held with the expressed goal (by SLORC) that power would be turned over to the winners. They continue to refuse to hold to their promise, and the legally elected government was finally forced to set itself up as a government in exile. Unocal, Total, and all other companies investing in Burma have limited themselves to negotiating with SLORC, thus taking political sides in this conflict, and thus interfering in the internal political issues of Burma.

Opposition groups have continually raised this concern, but to no avail. As one opposition member stated, "These companies relate to SLORC as though it represents the interests of the people of Burma, and consequently they have brought even more confusion into our politi-

cal and ethnic struggles. Now is simply not the time for foreign companies to invest in our natural resources."

• Sources:

IRRC, 1994 Company Report-D

Local Sources

Singapore PM Visits Burma

Goh Chok Tong, PM of Singapore, made a three day official visit to Burma from March 28 to 30. Goh said his visit to Burma was to explore opportunities for investment by Singapore companies. In 1993-94, SLORC and Singapore trade reach S\$720 million and Singapore investment exceeded S\$135 million. Goh indicated that future Singapore investments will also focus on tourism in Burma.

During a press conference, Goh insisted that the SLORC must open its door if SLORC wants to join the international community. He repeatedly told SLORC to enforce political stability for better foreign investment.

He affirmed that ASEAN's constructive engagement policy towards Burma is right. He criticized the attitude of western countries towards Burma as being hypocritical and said that when it comes to real choices, these western countries will place economics first.

ASEAN countries, including Singapore, are in competition to investment in Burma while the people of Burma continue to call for economic boycotts and to cut all relationships with SLORC.

POLITICS

Constructive Engagement

Thailand continues to pursue its "constructive engagement" policy towards its neighbor Burma. The Thai government's rationalization for holding to this policy is that, while Thailand truly wants to see a peaceful solution to the civil war in Burma, Thailand can not exert pressure on the Burmese to make specific political changes as this would be interfering in the internal affairs of a sovereign country.

ASEAN supports Thailand in this position, stating that no country has the right to interfere in the election process or the writing of a constitution of another country. Burma has already held an election in 1990 and is now in the process of drawing up their new constitution. This they must do without being pressured or manipulated by other countries.

In Thailand, the Burma policy is mainly influenced by three different departments: the Ministry of Interior (MOI), Foreign Minister (FM) and the National Security Council (NSC). These three departments do not always see eye to eye on how Thailand should be relating to Burma and have, on occasion, appeared to be in competition for control over the Burma policy. This has created confusion among both the military junta ruling Burma and the opposition forces.

Most recently, the NSC seems to have taken the lead in establishing Thai policy, and has made it clear that Thailand will relate to SLORC as the legitimate government, and will hold fast to the "constructive engagement" policy. Stating that Thailand has diplomatic relations with SLORC, the NSC confirmed that the internal affairs of Burma, such as their human rights situation,

were not for Thailand to question or challenge.

In 1992, Thai Foreign Minister, Prasong indicated that he felt there were some aspects of Thai policy towards Burma which were in need of re-evaluation giving opposition groups and human rights organizations hope that positive changes were in store. Prasong said that Thailand wants its neighbors to evolve out of military rule into more democratic structures and the present Thai policy has not resulted in

dow would give the leaders of Burma a chance to become more aware of how the modern world thinks and works, and the international community would begin to see more clearly how SLORC is slowly bringing about positive reforms to Burma. (TF930626)

Presently, the Thai policy towards Burma is probably clearer than it ever has been. Both the NSC and the FM seem to fully accept SLORC as the legitimate government of the country, and have made it clear that

Constructive engagement, they say, is not a policy to engage constructively with the group which seems to most fully reflect democratic principles and the voice of the Burmese people, but rather to engage with the group which offers the greatest hope for one's own economic and political benefits.

very positive changes. It has, in fact, strengthened military dictatorship in Burma. Prasong suggested that Thai policy should be more in line with that of the international community which places a higher emphasis on human rights for establishing a foreign policy. This was reiterated by Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Surin who said that Burma is a special case, and that Thai policy towards Burma should look more carefully at the human rights situation in the country..(NW921002)

However, by 1993 FM Prasong seemed to suddenly change his position. He stated that Thai policy on Burma remained unclear, and should now be readjusted to meet the changes taking place in Burma. With SLORC initiating a national convention in order to draw up a new constitution, Prasong suggested that Thailand should encourage the process. He also said Thailand should help Burma improve its international image by serving as Burma's "window to the world". This win-

"constructive engagement" is the Asian way of bringing about change in contrast to the isolation policy of the West. However, "constructive engagement" is not simply reflected in a closer relationship between the Thai government and SLORC. It is also reflected in increased pressure on the Mon, Karen, Karenni and Shan ethnic groups living along the Thai/Burma border to sign cease-fire agreements with SLORC as well as on other opposition forces to stop using Thailand as a base of anti-SLORC operations.

Critics of "construction engagement" say that Thailand is simply interested in supporting a winner in Burma which will guarantee Thai economic interests there. Constructive engagement, they say, is **not** a policy to engage constructively with the group which seems to most fully reflect democratic principles and the voice of the Burmese people, but rather to engage with the group which offers the greatest hope for



"Constructive engagement" perhaps means more consumer goods, but does it mean justice and human rights?

one's own economic and political benefits.

Dr. Alan Smith of the Asia Institute, Monash University, Melbourne states, "Thailand with its ASEAN partners have favoured 'constructive engagement' with the SLORC, by which they mean through continuing interaction, to offer encouragement to embark on appropriate reform. This policy of course politically justifies the continuation of a profitable relationship but reflects also the ASEAN countries' rejection of Western inspired intervention in the affairs of non-Western states, in general, including potentially, of course, themselves.

Certainly it could be argued that until now, Thailand's commitment to 'constructive engagement' has been a convenient facade for inaction. It has sought to avoid antagonising the SLORC in order to profit from the relationship, but it has also tolerated political activity of the organised Burmese opposition within Thailand while facilitating the provision of humanitarian aid to refugees and displaced persons in Thailand."

Smith goes on to argue, "SLORC has accepted that with Thailand's support it may be possible to strike deals with the minorities which will enable it to perpetuate the military's control of Burma with the minimum of concessions to democratic process and the minimum of concessions to the minority nationalities. Recent action by Thailand to apply pressure to the opposition groups to this end should be seen as a clear departure from 'constructive engagement' and clearly running counter to international policy."

Thus the "construction engagement" policy contradiction appears to emerge ever more clearly. While ASEAN nations continue insisting that they do not want to interfere in the internal affairs of Burma, they blatantly do so by choosing to relate constructively with SLORC (the ASEAN approach which they pontificate) while isolating the opposition groups in order to force them to negotiate with SLORC (the Western approach which they denounce as ineffective).

While much attention has been given to the ASEAN "constructive engagement" policy, not enough has

been given to their "isolation policy" towards the democratic opposition forces. While the two policies are opposites, they work in total harmony in favor of SLORC and against the popular movement for democratic and ethnic rights which has been struggling for several decades already. The process being created by these two policies does not necessarily bode well for the future of the people of Burma. Presently Mon, Karen and other groups along the Thai/Burma border are being pressured to enter cease-fire talks with SLORC at a distinct disadvantage, leaving little hope that a much needed long-term peace settlement can finally be reached. Refugees and political exiles living in Thailand are under increasing threat of repatriation, something they will accept only when SLORC gives up power and allows the people's elected representatives to establish a civilian and democratic government. Only then will they feel they can return home safely and begin rebuilding their country. These two issues alone suggest that isolating the opposition will not bring peace and stability to Burma.

ASEAN would do well to reconsider their "constructive engagement" policy. If they are truly interested in regional stability, and in protecting their economic interests in Burma, they should pursue a course which will lead to a positive solution to the root causes of conflict in Burma. No positive benefits can come to anyone if a forced "peace" in Burma suddenly goes sour and erupts once again into bloody civil unrest.

- Sources:

NW = Nation Weekent

TF = Thai Financial

"Ethnic Conflict and the State in Burma", Dr. Alan Smith, January 994

NEWS BRIEFS

Arms Embargo

1. Canada's ambassador told the United Nations in December that Canada would support an international embargo on weapons sales to Burma. Anne Park, head of the Canadian delegation to the UN Commission on Human Rights reiterated this in March in Geneva.

2. A petition from the Montreal and Ottawa Conference of the United Church calling for a complete arms embargo and full economic sanctions against SLORC is on its way to the General Council meeting this August, for approval by the whole Church.

• Source:

Canadian Friends of Burma,
940415

Legal Responsibility

The Center for Constitutional Rights in the USA has written to the chairpersons and CEO's of Texaco and Unocal warning them that under

US law they can be held legally liable for injuries inflicted by the Burmese army in support of their operations in that country. In a letter to the two companies, the CCR states, **As you may know, under standard US tort law, each of us, whether a natural person or a corporation, is responsible for the reasonably foreseeable consequences of our actions, even if those consequences involve the actions of a third party. Thus, if a corporation enters into a contractual relationship with disreputable parties, and it is reasonably foreseeable that those parties will hurt someone, the corporation may be held liable for the harm resulting from the business transaction.**

Both Texaco and Unocal are exploring for gas and oil in Burma, and Unocal is involved in a gas pipeline project to transport gas from Burma to Thailand. There are widespread reports that SLORC is using slave labor to build a road and a rail road in support of this project.

• Source:

Center for Constitutional Rights

ASEAN

Burma has now officially been invited by Thailand to attend the ASEAN foreign minister's meeting in Bangkok in July as a "special guest of the host country". Attempts to upgrade Burma's attendance to that of special guest of ASEAN, was unsuccessful. As a special guest of the host country, Burma will only be allowed to attend the opening and closing ceremonies of the meeting.

Members of ASEAN include Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. SLORC wants desperately to enter ASEAN, both for the economic gains such membership might bring to them as well as for the legitimacy it will give them.

Source:

BP 930426

BURMA ISSUES

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