

Burma Issues

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Despite the complacency of foreign governments and multi-lateral agencies, Burma's rural villagers continue to live with a dignity that transcends the harsh conditions of their existence. These people deserve a chance at genuine peace.

The SLORC junta has been busy convincing people in and out of Burma that its goal is peace and prosperity for all. Tired of war and seeking a better life for their people, eleven ethnic groups have signed cease-fire agreements which, although they have quelled the fighting, make no provisions for the solving the political foundations of Burma's civil strife. This edition of *Burma Issues* examines how cease-fire agreements do not equal peace, and do not indicate progress towards peace. We also report on those who have been convinced by the Burmese military's smiling overtures, including foreign investors and the UN, presenting more evidence of how "peace" offers nothing but suffering on the victims to Burma's civil wars.

Information for Action

Civil War

Eleven ethnic rebel groups have struck cease-fire agreements with SLORC in exchange for promises of development within their individually-controlled areas. While the stated aim of the agreements is regional development, there is deep-seated suspicion and distrust between the ethnic groups and the SLORC.

All rebel groups which have signed with SLORC have been allowed to keep their arms in their own areas of control. Consequently the three allied ethnic rebel groups, Karen, Karenni and Mon, are now willing to consider a ceasefire agreement. Although all three groups have been in contact with SLORC, little progress has been made. Armed skirmishes are continuing in the areas controlled by these groups.

Of the remaining three ethnic guerrilla groups, the Karen National Union is the strongest force in Burma. The political opposition to SLORC, which fled to the jungle after 1988, is carefully observing the KNU's moves.

One of the significant conditions of the agreement signed between the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the SLORC earlier this year was that political activists operating within Kachin territory be told to cease activity or leave. This has effectively silenced or removed a number of the SLORC's political opponents. However, the ceasefire is relatively fragile, and hostilities are likely to resume should the SLORC fail to deliver regional autonomy to the ethnic groups.

In November 1993 the SLORC called for peace dialogues with rebel groups inside Burma. The Karen National Union (KNU) responded formally in December 1993, via a

letter addressed to the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok. Signed by Bo Mya, KNU president, as well as the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), the letter requested that dialogue be held with the DAB rather than with individual ethnic rebels. In a verbal response delivered by Col Thein Shwe, military attache to the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok, the SLORC declined to enter negotiations with the DAB, and reiterated its intention of dealing with individual ethnic groups. This was not a promising beginning for the KNU, and the diplomatic snub of offering a verbal reply to a written document did not pass unnoticed.

The KNU subsequently called an emergency meeting of the DAB in an attempt to find a solution to the deadlock. As a result, the DAB allowed the KNU to open dialogue with the SLORC as an individual group. In March 1994, the KNU sent a three-member delegation from its jungle-based headquarters in Manerplaw to Bangkok to meet with Col. Thein Shwe. The meeting made little progress as the KNU delegation's request that talks be held in a third country, and with neutral observers, was totally rejected by the SLORC. The SLORC maintains the view that these peace talks are an internal affair and therefore must be held within the state boundary. They have not moved from this position.

While the KNU was attempting to engage in dialogue with the SLORC, there was an increase in religious tensions between Christians and Buddhist in the KNU-controlled area. (Most ethnic Karen leaders are Christian but the majority of its freedom fighters are Buddhist.) Although this briefly shook KNU's internal stability, the leaders responded promptly by mounting a campaign amongst both soldiers and civilians, reminding them of the Karen principal of freedom of religion, and the need for unity amongst themselves. Some Karen officials claimed that their enemies had clandestinely fomented and escalated the religious tensions.

Meanwhile, the Burmese army continues its mass relocation program aimed at strangling civilian support for the rebel forces in frontier areas. Soldiers have looted the villages for valuables and, even more seriously, have stolen the village cattle. As the majority of Karen are primitive farmers, animal power is still important for cultivation and transportation. An escaped civilian recently reported, "Our life now has nothing."

The situation in Burma is very tenuous. The SLORC, however, now vaunts the signing of cease-fire agreements as proof of greater stability for foreign business ventures in Burma. It also uses the deals to deflect international condemnation of its human rights record.

In reality there is unlikely to be a lasting peace in Burma unless the SLORC is willing to engage in collective talks between all groups, including detained and exiled political opposition. An international economic sanction and arms embargo - as requested by both the Burmese and ethnic opposition - could pave the way to collective talks which will bring genuine peace to Burma.

Human Rights

STATELESS PEOPLE

SLORC's bogus peace overtures are not only a frustrating postponement of genuine political dialogue aimed at resolving decades of armed conflict and social strife in Burma. The artifice they construct for the world also threatens to prolong and worsen the suffering of those disenfranchised Burmese who enjoy few if any of their fundamental rights and freedoms.

The inalienable right to a nationality, a cornerstone of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is one term which has been ignored and violated systematically by SLORC. Now, the United Nations seeks to assist Burma's military junta in avoiding the moral and legal obligations demanded by a faithful understanding of this elemental concept.

The plight of one quarter million Muslim Rohingya people who took shelter in Bangladesh demonstrates SLORC's callous, flagrantly disingenuous policies and the UN's complicity in putting, as always, the people last.

Background

1991 witnessed a tremendous exodus of Rohingya Muslims from northern Arakan state- nearly one quarter of a million people fled to Bangladesh after a severe and merciless campaign began to drive them from Burmese territory. The abuses have been well-documented elsewhere, and are universally interpreted as an effort to rid Arakan of Muslims. Since that time, the refugees have lived in 19 camps clustered around Cox's Bazaar, at the eastern tip of Bangladesh, where they have suffered the refugees' lament: abuse

by the authorities, physical deprivation, and deadly exposure to the elements.

Itself a desperately poor country, Bangladesh was eager to host the new arrivals as briefly as possible. Just as eager to erase the blemish of mass persecution, Burma's ruling junta entered into dialogue with Bangladesh and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 1992. Although early agreements

ment of the Union of Myanmar on 5 November 1993, mass voluntary repatriation is likely to become a reality."

Current Events

Facilitating the drive to rid Bangladesh of Burma's Rohingyas are the UNHCR and the UN's World Food Program- two highly politicized international aid establishments. In a remarkable "Joint Appeal for the Voluntary Repatriation from Bangladesh to Myanmar 1994-1995," the UN manages to outline its plan for returning the refugees and seek 38 million dollars in support without

Does the World Food Program really believe that two expatriot latrine experts and five SLORC-appointed "Community Development Workers," occasionally patrolling Arakan in white Toyota Landcruisers, will have any effect on the serious abuses of the Burmese military against a quarter million Rohingya people?

referred to the "safe and voluntary" return of refugees, later protocols dropped this language and seemed to seek the most expeditious means possible for returning Rohingyas to Burma. Lately, "safe and voluntary" have been key ingredients to the UN's public relations campaigns for repatriation. Repatriation became a volatile issue in the camps. Many were staunchly opposed to being sent back to the hands of their persecutors- the very military which had slaughtered their livestock, burned down their mosques, raped the women and tortured the men to death.

To date, some 50,000 Rohingyas have been returned to Burma, and the UN plans to accelerate repatriation, recently stating that "with the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Gover-

ever once mentioning the conditions or events which caused the people to flee in the first place.

While UNHCR may consider signing the MOU with SLORC to be a positive step, for in doing so Burma allows Rohingyas to live in Arakan, it falls far short of guaranteeing stability for these persecuted peoples. Without confronting the issue of the Rohingya as people without the protection of a nationality, the UN affirms its commitment to working in the best interests of government- no matter how oppressive- rather than the disempowered people most in need of representation.

Does the UNHCR really think that stateless people can be safely returned to a country where depraved indifference to their fundamental rights and freedoms once forced

them away, without first ensuring that the mechanisms of terror had been forever abolished? The WFP touts as a victory SLORC's agreement to allow one or two monitors to visit, but perhaps not reside in, Arakan, to oversee the correct implementation of the UN's "refugee reintegration" scheme. If WFP's answer to safeguarding the rights of

250 thousand people is to have two expatriate latrine experts patrolling the area in white Landcruisers, accompanied by five SLORC-approved Burmese, then the organization is naive to the tactics and realities of military rule.

In brief, it was precisely because the Burmese military government refused to accept the Rohingyas as

Burmese citizens that they were driven into Bangladesh. Thus, "repatriation" in this case is a convenient political construct, because the Rohingyas are essentially stateless people with no land to which they can return-- people deprived of their fundamental right to a nationality. Their status as citizens of "the Union of Myanmar" has not been a part of the negotiations among SLORC, Bangladesh and the WFP/UNHCR. Therefore, the rights that were denied these people in 1991 will continue to elude them.

The very body that formulated and claims to promote the fundamental right to a nationality has not only ignored the jeopardy that the absence of that right threatens, but has become actively involved in forcing people to relive the abuse from which they once sought refuge.--
sources: Asia Watch 090893, UNHCR 12/93

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

(applying to all members of the "human family")

Article 15

1. Everyone has the right to a nationality
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality

Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951)

(to which neither Bangladesh nor Burma is a signatory, but the principles of which the United Nations is obligated to promote)

Article 33

1. No Contracting State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion



HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTING

A frequent complaint about human rights reporting from Burma's civil war is that accounts appear in the press sometimes six months or more after the fact, and this lag dampens the potency of international advocacy effort. Why should we worry about summer '93 when summer '94 is upon us?

Although many months may have passed since an execution, rape or burning of a village, the accounts of the incident which have been painstakingly prepared are never "outdated." While justice is pending for the victims of an abusive military, the urgency of their experience wanes not a single degree, just as the brutality of the abuse is not tempered by time.

The brave and dedicated fieldworkers who weave their way from village to village, documenting abuse and training disempowered peasants to speak about human rights do their best to generate a reliable stream of information. Without their participation, virtually no news of the injustices perpetrated in Burma's civil war zones would ever reach the outside world.

Most international supporters of human rights in Burma live in societies where the information superhighway's promises of uninterrupted communication are imminent. The people whose rights we seek to pro-

fect struggle to develop information footpaths. Though the intersections are sometimes slow and awkward, all human rights proponents must work to maximize the efforts of our sources.

Shan State

Abuse of Forced Laborers

On August 18, 1993 Tsai Hla-thay, a Shan farmer, was executed by SLORC's No. 246 infantry. He was among several people captured to carry ammunition and supplies for SLORC columns moving between Laikha and Kun Hing. Unable to carry the heavy loads any more, he was shot to death by an unnamed soldier. Another porter in the same group, TSai TSaam Mya, attempted to escape, but was caught and beaten severely with sticks.--source: *Shan Human Rights Foundation*

Union Solidarity and Development Association

Observers convinced of SLORC's growing legitimacy and support among the Burmese people should consider the following reports, broadcast on BBC radio in February and March of this year. The Union Solidarity and Development Association, contrived to demonstrate popular backing for the military, has itself been the cause of much suffering.

"In Mandalay City, the SLORC announced on loudspeakers that anyone who did not participate in the rally would have their water and electricity shut off, and would be fined 100 kyats each. So 90% of the people dared not disobey this command. It is just like the Burmese proverb about lovers, which says 'Even though she dares not participate, she is forced to play the game from beneath. He forces her to receive his kisses against her will, and she is forced to follow behind him like a wife.'"-- broadcast February

21 (transcript courtesy of the Karen Human Rights Group)

"...In our northern Shan state the USDA public rally was held on Friday, January 21. The number of people participating in the rally did not exceed 10,000, but Radio Myanmar announced that 210,000 people attended the same rally. As for the students, their teachers warned them that each and every one of them must attend the rally, and bring along a package of food, and if they failed to act accordingly they would be caned 15 times each. Government workers were threatened that if they failed to attend the rally, they should know what the consequences would be.

"The entire population of Burma is against this sort of rotten tactic by SLORC. SLORC may be able to gather people, but they can never obtain their respect and sympathy"-- broadcast February 21 (transcript courtesy of the Karen Human Rights Group)

"In our town of Prome, people were all brought together in a sandy com-

pound at 9 p.m. on the night before the rally. After sitting for several hours on the sandy ground, which had been sprayed with water, some people began asking permission to go outside the compound to answer nature's call. The security forces, the guards around the compound, refused to allow them to go out, and a conflict broke out. Many people began to climb up the fences to try to get out. The guards began to beat them with pieces of bamboo and sticks.

"In the middle of the resulting rush, many men, women and children fell to the ground. Two men were trampled to death. Twenty people were wounded-- one of them lost one of his eyes. Two women had their backs broken.

"But this information was never reported on Radio Myanmar. Why? To let everyone know the true story of the USDA, I must write this letter to the BBC." (signed, "A Civil Servant. Prome Town, Pegu Division")-- broadcast February 21 (transcript courtesy of the Karen Human Rights Group)



Burma's oppressed villagers are so resourceful that even the charred remains of a SLORC-burned village are reused as charcoal

Human Rights Feature - Part One

In April, the Karen Human Rights Group published *More SLORC Abuses: Thaton and Pa'an Districts*, detailing recent violations of human dignity perpetrated by the Burmese military. The report included the following account by a 39 year old Karen woman, remarkable for its detail, insight and sheer humanity. In the first installment of a series, *Burma Issues* shares her experiences with human rights supporters worldwide.

Hello nephew, we're glad to see you come and visit us from Manerplaw, we appreciate it and I'm glad to see you're in good health. We live here in our village and the situation is very hard for us here now. Do you know why? Because of the SLORC military, they come and oppress us and make life hard for us. The troops who stay at the camp order us to help them, so all the men and women and even children who are big enough to work have to help them. If they demand bamboo, we have to give them bamboo. If they order leaves, we must get them leaves. If they demand firewood or food, we have to give it to them--everything they ask for...We have to give them everything, and they don't give us anything for it. They eat for free. If they have all the food they want, their faces look happy, but if not then their faces become angry and you can tell they're going to make trouble so you must hurry and give them more.

The soldiers are very happy when we give them money because we're too sick to go as porters. But when porters escape they are very angry, and we have to give them chicken, pork, rice, and whatever we have. Even if we don't have these things we have to find them. Sometimes we have to buy them from other villages and give them to the soldiers. Then back in the village we have to total how much we all spent

so we can divide it equally, and sometimes quarrels break out because of this. We also have to send women as couriers for them, one woman every day. If a woman doesn't go then the SLORC gets very angry, but nobody wants to go because these are hard times and we have to support our families, so the women end up arguing amongst themselves: "This is your turn--you have to go," "But I don't want to go" and so on. In the end we just have to go. These problems are not only in our village, but in every village. So in what way are you going to help us live peacefully?

There's just too much to tell! We have to sweep the road [for mines] every day, all the women are blind from all the dust, sweeping the road all the time. All the women and children big enough to work, starting at 7 or 8 years old, have to go do this every day, then every night all the men have to sleep along the road as "guards." The men have to sleep on the ground unless they build a special shelter. The women and children are very busy sweeping the road every day, and families in the village who only have one daughter have a hard time, because the mother and daughter have to go on alternate days or else there would be nobody left to work at home. Then if any mine explodes, the soldiers accuse the women of laying the mine while they sweep! The soldiers pull their

hair, slap their faces, then kick them. They don't care if they're old, young, or even children-- they just do whatever they want. Just think about the women and children having to do this every day while the men have to go work to produce food, and you'll see why we can't get enough food any more. The soldiers are always out looking and listening for people. If they hear the bamboo bell of a cow or buffalo they follow it because they know the owner will be following, and then they capture the owner. The owners of the animals don't know anything, they just walk along behind their animals singing a song and then they're suddenly captured by the SLORC to be porters. Then no one tends to the animals, so they wander into the rice fields and eat the rice and trample it and the farmer loses part of his crop too! It's wrong! The Burmese don't even try to fight their enemies, they just come to oppress the villagers. I'll tell you about it, nephew. We ask them, "Son, why don't you fight your enemies? You only fight us," and they answer, "Because we don't find our enemies here, only you, so we fight you. If we ask you where our enemies are you never tell us, even though you know everything." That's wrong, but to them it's right.

Continued in next month's edition of Burma Issues

Economics

HOTEL INVESTMENT REPORT

On the March 28, the Shangri-la chain of Singapore signed a contract with the SLORC worth US\$150m to build and operate a hotel in Burma. This is the largest sum yet invested in Burma's hotel and tourism sector. The SLORC does appear to be achieving some credibility in the business world.

Since the SLORC established a Ministry of Hotel and Tourism (MHT) in September 1992 five Singapore companies have signed contracts with SLORC for hotel construction and operation in Burma. The Shangri-la is the latest of these, others being:

*Nawarat International Co. (US\$10m investment, signed 30 Oct 93);

* Strait Greenfield (US\$35m investment-signed 15 Nov 93);

* Park View Hotel (US\$18m investment-signed 18 Nov, 93);

* Myanmar Swan Hotel (US\$3.2 million-signed 14 Dec 93).

These are all 100 percent foreign-owned, except for the Myanmar Swan, which is a joint venture. The five companies together have agreed to invest US\$216.2m into the sector.

Additionally a total of six Thai companies have signed contracts with the SLORC since their brutal sup-

pression of the democracy movements in 1988. The first to sign was the Vitavas International Company of Thailand, which signed an agreement with SLORC on 19 January 1990. Their contract was to build the Golden Triangle Paradise Resort at a cost of US\$10m. The other five companies are:

* Union Farm (VES group) - building Tha Htay Kyun Resort Hotel at Victoria Point

* Restore Kandawgyi (US\$10.5 - signed 6th April, 93);

* Hotel Sofital Yangon (US\$42m investment - signed 29th Nov 93);

* Floating Hotel (US\$10m - signed 18 Jan 94);

* Thai Industrial Connection Ltd. (US\$ 15m - signed 4 March 94).

All these companies are 100 percent foreign investment, and the total Thai business investment in this sector is US\$109.5m.

The Hong Kong-based Strand Hotel International Co. and Emerald Rose Hotel have already signed contracts with SLORC. The agreement with the Strand Co. was signed on 15 May 1990 to renovate and upgrade three old hotels, Inya Lake, Thamada and Strand in Burma. This agreement is a joint venture which calls for an investment of approximately US\$18m. The Emerald Rose has signed an agreement to invest US\$25m in building and operating a hotel in Rangoon.

Two Malaysian companies have already signed investment agreements. On 17 December 1993, Salon Island Resort agreed to invest US\$44m to construct and operate a

hotel at Victoria Point. Two months later, on 1 March 1994, the Idris Hydraulic Group signed an agreement to construct hotels and a shopping mall in downtown Rangoon.

The Japanese Myanmar MCG Corporation has signed an agreement to build and operate the 350-room Yangon International Hotel in Rangoon.

All contracts with foreign companies are to run for more than two decades, and a total of more than US\$400m has been invested. At the termination of the contracts, all hotels and resort will be the property of Burma.

Recent figures from Burma show that from April 1993 to February 1994, 52,998 foreigners passed through Rangoon Airport and of these 16,123 were businessmen. MHT is planning to bring tourists from across the borders of China and Thailand on 14 to 28 day visas.

Most of the companies investing in Burma are from the members of ASEAN. The call by the Burmese people for economic sanctions is obviously going unheeded. There needs to be more effective action by Burma's friends in these countries. Organizations and individuals should try to bring pressure to bear on the governments and business communities of their region.-- *sources: TD (940400), AI (940500), NLM (940305)*

News In Brief

On May 10, Japanese Prime minister Tsitomo Hate affirmed that his government will continue to seek the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. His statement was made in response to a request by U Win Khet, Chairman of the National League for Democracy in Burma (Liberated Area, Burma) who was attending the meeting of the Council of Socialist International. Moreover, Japanese Prime Minister Hata and Foreign Minister Koji Kakizawa were also requested not to renew Official Development Assistance to the SLORC. During the meeting Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister, Hun Sen, expressed his support for Aung San Suu Kyi and said he would do his best to seek her release.-- *source: BA (940516)*

KNLF Affiliation with Slorc

On May 9, the SLORC held a ceremony to mark the surrender of the Karenni National Liberation Front (KNLF) in Loi-kaw, garrison town

of the Kayah State. It was the 11th guerrilla group to affiliate with the SLORC, and consists of about 1,800 fighters led by Tun Kyaw. All together, thirteen of SLORC's high rank officials attended the ceremony-- *source: NLM (940510), TN (940510)*

SLORC's offensive in Shan State

Since December last year, SLORC has been mobilizing 20,000 troops in Shan State to launch a heavy offensive against the Mong Tai Army led by Khun Sa. About 10,000 MTA member are defending their territory. The fighting seemed to intensify early in May and casualties from both sides were high. Hundreds of civilians have reportedly fled the hostile zone, opposite Mae Hong Son in Thailand, into the area controlled by Khun Sa, while some have crossed the border seeking refuge in Thailand.-- *source: Personnel*

SLORC accuses Karen and Karenni of aiding Khun Sa

The SLORC has accused two rebel ethnic groups of co-operation with Khun Sa. Col. Thein Shwe, military attache to the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok claimed the Karen National Union (KNU) and Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) had each sent a delegation to Khun Sa in April.

While both the KNPP and the KNU had indeed sent delegations to Shan State, the suggestions of military co-operation with Khun Sa was denied. The Karenni delegation had agreed with Khun Sa that they would not allow SLORC troops to use Karenni territory in order to attack Khun Sa bases. For their part, the KNU denied any cooperation with Khun Sa, though they said they had sent a delegation

to gather information on the ammunition production capacity of Khun Sa.--*source; TN (940705), KNU*

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