

Burma Issues

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CONTENTS

Ex-Delegate Daniel Aung
on what's wrong with the
National Convention p. 2

Suu Kyi Speaks: Excerpts
from February's talks be-
tween a US congressman
and the detained NLD
leader p. 3

General Bo Mya on
SLORC's
cease-fire talks p. 5

Human Rights Feature, Part
Two p. 6

News Briefs p. 8

While civil war continues to be the most urgent affliction in rural Burma, all parties seem to recognize that warfare itself can not solve any of the country's fundamental problems. Instead, minority groups, urban democratic leaders and even the military government are seeking dialogue-- but their interpretations of what that means and what it can resolve sometimes differ dramatically. The June edition of Burma Issues listens to several views on the potential and pitfalls of political dialogue.

Unity among the diverse government opposition groups-- transcending political, geographic and ethnic boundaries-- may be the only hope for genuine, peaceful reform in Burma



Information for Action

National Convention, or National Disgrace?

In April, delegate Daniel Aung fled the constitutional convention because of military manipulation. His story lets the world know what the national convention is really all about.

SLORC has been vaunting the present National Convention as building a constitution for a democratic state. Asean member countries have voiced that the convention is a sign of improvements in the Burmese political process.

However, Daniel Aung, a candidate of Mongpyin Constituency during the 1990 general election, offers a different perspective on the National Convention.

Aung, 52, is also chairman of Lahu National Development Party (LNDP). He attended the SLORC-sponsored National Convention from the start January 1993 until the most recent adjournment, in April. Aung left Rangoon on 12 April and arrived on 1 May at Manerplaw, jungle headquarters of allied rebel groups on the Thai-Burma border.

Daniel Aung's statement:

I have lost all faith in the National Convention convened by SLORC, because-

- 1) The SLORC had prepared and laid down in advance all the aims and objectives of the convention instead of allowing the representatives to lay down the aims and objectives of their own choice.
- 2) Similarly, the basic principle of the state constitution to be drafted were laid down by the SLORC and representative were merely asked about their appropriateness. The suggestions given and positions formulated by the representatives were never respected by the SLORC. It simply went ahead and adopted the principles of its own choice.
- 3) The principles of selecting the president it had adopted would only allow the military to permanently monopolize the executive power.

The attempt of the SLORC to downgrade the role of, and eventually eliminate, the political parties by imposing various restrictions on them is dramatically opposed to the system of multi-party democracy. At present-

a) A central executive committee member of a political party can travel only after reporting and receiving permission from the military unit concerned

b) Any vacancy in the central executive committee due to any reason is not allowed to be filled, but reduction of the number of members or resignation is allowed.

c) Organizing committees of the political parties in various townships are not allowed to engage in any organization activities.

d) In some townships, if the number of township committee members has decreased below five, the committee is abolished without informing the parent party.

Nowadays, The SLORC is in the process of forming the so-called Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). I view this as an attempt by the SLORC to trick or force the people to do what it wants, in some ways like the previous Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP).

- a) People are forced to attend mass meeting or parades.
- b) After forcibly gathering the people in this manner, the SLORC spreads the false propaganda that its program or policies have been massively supported by the people.
- c) The SLORC is spending large amounts of state treasury funds on the association to serve its own narrow purpose.

After considering the facts given above, I reached the conclusion that far from serving any useful purpose in the interest of the people, a representative continuing to attend the SLORC National Convention would be soundly condemned by history. In consequence, I came over to the liberated areas to continue my struggle for freedom and democracy.

U Daniel Aung

May 26, 1994.

Suu Kyi Speaks

In February, Aung San Suu Kyi met a trio of prominent visitors, marking the first time since her detention began in 1989 that any one other than a close family member was granted

access to the NLD leader. The following is a partial transcript of their discussions.

Key: ASSK=Aung San Suu Kyi; BR=US Congressman Bill Richardson; JR=UNDP representative in Rangoon Jehan Raheem; PS=New York Times journalist Philip Shenon

On the National Convention

ASSK: Before I state my views, would you tell me what you think of the National Convention?

BR: It is not a serious effort. It is the position of the US that the 1990 election results must be respected. We have no confidence that the [convention] process is significant. We have pressed for a specific timetable for a transition to democracy. We want to know when there will be elections, under what conditions they will be held, what international observers will be permitted.

JR: I see the National Convention as very formalistic. This continues to worry me. I understand that in certain circumstances there is a need for formalism and one must be careful not to see formalism itself as dangerous. But there are aspects of the National Convention that bewilder me. Debate seems very sterile.

PS: It is a sad display. I did have access to the Convention at one point and saw something called the NLD there, including Aung Shwe and other leaders. They were terribly fearful. There was no real debate going on.

ASSK: It is very much a facade...In Rangoon people feel very much under the eye of Big Brother. I think the National Convention is a farce. If people can't speak, if they're just there to nod their heads, then that is not a convention. I cannot accept it

as seriously representing the will of the people...Under current circumstances, there is no use talking about a multi-party democracy. Can you visit party offices?

PS: I visited the NLD office here in Rangoon and I have never seen people so scared. They still had your picture up, but they asked me to leave.

On Ethnic Groups' Opposition

BR: Do you think the ethnic groups are committed to democracy?

ASSK: In principle they are committed. They must understand that only a system of liberal democracy can guarantee their rights. But at the same time, I know they are suffering. I can understand them taking the steps they are taking.

I believe there is great support for democracy, but people are frightened. After thirty years of dictatorship, it takes time to change. The Burmese people are very intelligent. Maybe they are not as active as they should be for their rights, but they are not easily fooled. They must try to develop greater self-confidence. International support can help in this regard.

On International Action

BR: As you know, there are many Burmese in the United States and Europe, many Burmese dissidents in Bangkok and the U.S. What would you say to them?

ASSK: I would say "unity." They must not squabble. It is very normal for dissident groups to do just that. But they simply must not-- if they

can't agree on something, then they must put it on ice. This is one of the reasons I don't want the focus to be on individuals-- there can't be all chiefs and no Indians.

PS: But it may be useful internationally to focus on a personality like yours.

ASSK: I don't mind being a figurehead if that helps...but I'm thinking of Burma in the long-term.

PS: How should the outside world treat Burma now? Should trade be limited?

JR: Trade does appear to bring about an element of greater openness. There does seem to be some value in trade as an instrument for increasing international contact.

ASSK: I think you are all talking about sanctions. There are two schools of thought on them, and the controversy seems never to have been resolved. People don't want to do anything that would be harmful to ordinary people. But is existing trade with Burma really helping the people or allowing the government to dig in its heels? Which examples to people cite of economic development preceding democratic development?

BR: Professor Steinberg talks about the approach used by Japan and Singapore, i.e., in favor of greater engagement with SLORC. They believe that aid should be increased with conditions.

ASSK: How do they believe this will improve the situation?

BR: But the SLORC suggests [it] is relaxing its policies. There is an apparent agreement to work with the Kachins, the permission for UNHCR to work in Arakan State, the permission for me to meet with you. They are granting all my requests. They say they are moving in the right direction-- that is for the United States to respond.

ASSK: I can't follow your argument. I thought you were suggesting the SLORC was acting in response to economic help, but now you seem to be saying they are doing so in hope of getting economic help. Are the improvements you talk about the result of better economic conditions and constructive engagement or do they come about as a result of the SLORC's hope for receiving concessions?...I am not sure that the advocates of constructive engagements are clear.

On the Conditions of Her House Arrest

PS: What about the removal of the guards from the street in front of your house?

ASSK: They are all next store and in back, I don't know how many there might be.

PS: What about the stories of you going on a hunger strike?

ASSK: Sometimes I did not eat because I had no food. At one point they came into my house without an invitation. At that juncture, I wouldn't let anyone in...they broke the locks on the doors. Eventually they apologized and now only come in on my invitation.

At one point I ran out of money. I initially only had what money was in the house. I then sold bathtubs, later furniture, an air conditioner. They sold my furniture for me...I was seriously malnourished for about a four-five week period. I for one have never broken any agree-

ments I made with SLORC. They can't say the same. At one point I was so weak I could not get out of bed. Was it serious? The doctors did not come.

PS: What is the worst part of being isolated?

ASSK: It is worrying about my people. I listen to the BBC World Serv-

"I think the National Convention is a farce. If people can't speak, if they're just there to nod their heads, then that is not a convention. I cannot accept it as seriously representing the will of the people"

ice as well as the BBC's Burmese programming, VOA's Burmese service, and the Democratic Voice of Burma. It is a pity they jam it. I can still hear it. Mr. Richardson, please have them unjam the DVB.

PS: Is it true they had to change your guards because you tended to win them over?

ASSK: When I would go to the garden, I would talk to them, but I don't know if I won them over. They were always being changed, but I think this was simply a matter of course. It is a tedious job. There used to be fifteen guards inside the compound. The ones inside the compound appear to come from several agencies. At the back they are all from the army. The ones on the street I believe used to be at least partly from the police. I don't see guns.

Michael brings classical music, and my son more modern things. I like the Pachabel canon and recently heard some Bocherini that I liked. My son introduced me to the Grateful Dead. Some of their songs are quite pleasant. I also like Bob Marley, especially his set of songs of freedom, particularly "Stand Up for Your Rights." I have probably read hundreds of books.

On Her Role in Burmese Politics

ASSK: Please don't misunderstand me [when I say that I am willing to talk to SLORC about not taking part in politics for a specific period of time]. When I joined the democracy movement I made few promises. But one I did make was that I would work for the movement until we achieve our goal. Not holding public office is not a problem for me. Public office is not my goal. But there are certain values that must continue to be upheld.

If they are afraid of something, if they are serious in thinking that I have a neo-colonialist bogey behind me, then they need to talk to me. My loyalties are to Burma. But I for one will not abuse other countries and the international community to prove my love. I am not surprised by the qualifications for president they are proposing for the new constitution. These reflect their misunderstanding of democracy and the Burmese people. How can they think someone would place Burma under foreign influence in a democratic Burma where one is in office only so long as one enjoys popular support? The Burmese people will only support someone who has their interests at heart.

I am not staying here out of fear that the Burmese people will not forgive me for leaving. In the early 70's, when I returned to the country on one of my family visits, I was asked indirectly if I had any interest in politics. I said then that, if ever I was

going to get involved in Burmese politics, it would only be from inside the country. I would not like to have misled them in any way. The NCGUB and others are doing their best, but there must be people prepared to stay and work for democracy from inside the country. I am needed here. Moreover, the principle of trying to drive someone out of their country is unacceptable.

I remain optimistic. I am optimistic by nature. I also have faith in the people of Burma. We of course all have our faults. They are easily intimidated, but they are also shrewd and intelligent. I continue to believe they will get there.

Free Suu Kyi, Free Burma

The Burma Peace Foundation has recently published ***Free Suu Kyi, Free Burma (and don't forget the Burma)***, a seminal 199 page dossier containing 78 documents related to Aung San Suu Kyi. Release coincides with the start of an international campaign seeking the unconditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners in Burma. In addition to reproduced articles and essays about, by and for Suu Kyi, BPF has compiled a comprehensive and indispensable list of groups and individuals around the world working on Burma.

Suggested donation to cover the cost of printing and mailing is US\$15, checks payable to Fellowship of Reconciliation/Suu Kyi. Mail to **Free Suu Kyi, Free Burma, 6th Floor, 777 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA.**

General Bo Mya discusses SLORC's cease-fire talks

The following interview with Bo Mya, President of the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), was conducted by a group of foreign teachers during their May visit to Manerplaw, headquarters of the KNU.

Reporter: What do you think about the present SLORC's cease fire announcement?

Mya: For me, the point of politics is to pursue our rights. This means it is necessary to apply a political solution. Since the government is still using military coercion, the cease fire will be only temporary, until they resume their offensives. It won't last for long.

Rep: What do you think about SLORC's offering peace dialogue with your organization?

Mya: As everyone knows, SLORC starts the military offensives. However, when they began offering peace talk, we considered that it could be a chance to solve political problems by political means. This is why we accepted their offer. Our will is also to solve political problems by the most political means possible.

If they really want to talk, they must send an official letter to us first. What we want is an official message.

Though we have officially sent a letter, demanding peace dialogue to be held in a third country, they have not responded yet. We will accept only an official correspondence. We can not go and meet with SLORC without having any response. Their peace talk offering is only a lie. They are trying fool the world also.

Rep: Which foreign country will you prefer as a place to talk with SLORC?

Mya: Whatever third country accepts us, we will talk to SLORC there.

Rep: As you said whatever country is possible, did you approach to your neighbors, which means Thailand?

Mya: Yes, we have tried. They seemed very reluctant to host us.

Rep: Why do you think Thailand is reluctant to respond?

Mya: I was told that if SLORC requests Thailand, they (Thai government) will consider hosting talks. If SLORC doesn't, they will not consider.

Source: Pa-doh Thu Ye, Mergui/Tavoy District, KNU.

Human Rights Feature - Part Two

The second installment of an in-depth account of injustice and perseverance in Karen State's civil war zones, as recorded by the Karen Human Rights Group's April report *More SLORC Abuses: Thaton and Pa'an Districts*.

The SLORC orders women to go as porters, and if they don't go then the soldiers come and arrest them, take them away to jail and bind their hands and feet. Women have to leave their children at home and go to the camp to carry things. The soldiers say it will just be for one day, but then keep them there for two or three days, and their children get hungry and start crying because they want to eat. Some of the women aren't allowed back until late at night, and then they start cooking because they haven't eaten all day. Sometimes we have to go as porters in the rainy season, and along the way the rivers are flooded and we have to swim across with our loads. One woman from our village was carrying for them in the rainy season, and while crossing a flooded river she slipped and fell over in the current. She couldn't swim and she had a load so she just sank, and her friend grabbed her by the hair and had to pull her out to save her. When they ask for porters and we don't send them, the first time we get a letter, then we get a second letter, then for the third warning they send a letter with charcoal, chilies and a bullet inside. Most villages often receive the bullet, charcoal and chilies. We just received it once, and I went directly to the camp commander and said, "Son, what does this mean?" He said, "Oh it's very easy-- the bullet means we'll kill all you villagers, the charcoal means we'll burn down the whole village and the chilies mean we'll cook your animals into curry." He told me, "If we set your village on fire then everyone in your village will have to flee, including you, Mother, and then everything you leave in the village becomes ours. The only thing I forgot was to put an onion in together with the chilly." They're mad, these Burmese! They're just wrong, they're wrong! But me, I'm getting old so I can't fight and shoot them. If I do anything against them it will have to be slowly bit by bit.

"When their trucks explode the SLORC puts all the blame on villagers even though it has nothing to do with us. The SLORC's enemies do that, not us."

Now SLORC 84 Battalion of 99 Division has a camp at the village. I know some of the officers' names [omitted to protect the village]. In December, 1993 84 Battalion was making an operation to the south and they did many bad things and killed many villagers. They killed two people in Noh La Plaw village, one person in Pwo village, one person in Kru See, one person in Pwa Ghaw-- I don't remember all the village names, but they killed people in almost every village. They killed two people in Baw Tha Pyu, a father and his son-in-law who just went to cart their rice from the fields. The SLORC saw them along the way so they killed both of them. They kill people senselessly. If you think carefully about that, nephew, there's no sense to it. If they found those two men with guns in the forest together with the Karen soldiers, they could kill them. But now they just find people coming back from their farm with a bullock cart and kill them. That hurts the people very much, so all the people are afraid. To get food we have to clear fields and plant rice, but now we dare not do this anymore. We

can't work so we can't improve our lives, and it's very hard for us. 84 Battalion slept one night at Noh La Plaw, and the soldiers ordered one woman there to sell them a goat but she said, "I only have a small kid and its mother, so if I sell the mother what will happen to the kid? How can I get any more goats?" The soldiers said, "Oh, don't say anything, we'll just eat both of them." She refused, so that night while she slept they killed both the mother and the kid and ate them. In the morning, she saw that they were gone and asked the soldiers if they did it, and they said "No, maybe they're just lost somewhere" The SLORC soldiers don't come to search for their enemies, just to destroy things, make trouble and oppress the villagers. Last rainy season, 99 Division was fighting near Twee Pa Wih Kyo [Sleeping Dog Mountain], so they ordered village elders to send one, two or three elders from each village. They put them in a small house that fits

eight people and tied their hands and feet so they were all standing facing each other, for in each side of the hut. The elders asked them, "Why are you doing this?", and the soldiers said, "Don't you know? because the ringworm [derogatory term for Karen rebels] shell us here, but every time we ask you about them you say you don't know anything. That's why you're here." Some of the women elders who were tied up there needed to breastfeed their babies, and some had brought their children along. After feeding them, they just had to put their babies down to sleep in the dirt. That's how 99 Division treats people. Now we have heard that these 99 Division troops will go home, but the 33 Division will stay.

When their trucks explode the SLORC puts all the blame on villagers even though it has nothing to do with us. The SLORC's enemies do that, not us. SLORC comes here to find their enemies, so their enemies find them too and blow up their trucks, but then the SLORC orders the villagers to pay for the truck. We explain to them, "Son, we didn't plant the mine, your enemies did, but when your truck explodes you come to us. Why does this have anything to do with us?" They answer, "People of your own nationality did this because they don't love you, so you have to pay for it. They know that if they do this you'll have to pay, so why do they do it?" I told them, "Because you came out here to fight them, so of course they find a way to fight back, but then you oppress us by demanding compensation from us." He answered, "That's not oppression. We don't oppress you. We can't find them and make them pay for it, so we come to you instead, and then maybe they won't do it again."

There was a truck that exploded about the beginning of February at Tah Paw, not far from a SLORC camp. At the time I was on my way home from Thaton town. The mine destroyed the truck, so the SLORC ordered the villagers to pay 60,000 kyat. They didn't want to pay, because their village has only 50 houses and they can't afford it or get the money. So the villagers just kept quiet and hoped that the SLORC wouldn't bother to come and get the money. But instead, the SLORC came into their village and shot their guns beside and above all the people to frighten them. Then they started shouting, "If you don't pay the money, we'll kill all of you in this village." All the women, men, old people and children were afraid so they started collecting money among themselves. Some of them didn't have any money so they took the rice they had for the next one or two months, sold it for money and then gave it. After paying, people had no food to eat and had to find some way to get some food. At the same time other villages had to pay too. Noh Aw Hla had to

pay 50,000, Noh La Plaw 50,000, Pwa Ghaw 50,000, Kru See 50,000, Pan Ta Ray 50,000 and Day Law Po 50,000. For just one truck they asked this much money-- they are only coming here to do business. How can the people not get poor when they do this?

They also ordered money from our village and other villages around us even though we are not close to Tah Paw. When I got home people in our village were saying "They've ordered us to pay 50,000 kyats-- what can we do?" We decided this isn't right. We can't pay again and if we had to pay it would be better to run away someplace far away and live there. So we decided to go to their camp and tell them bravely that we can't pay. When we told the camp commander he answered, "Mother, I don't know anything about this, my job is just to sit in my office and follow orders from above. I have to ask you for everything we need, like leaves for the roof, firewood, porters, couriers, labourers and bamboo, but the truck has to do with the military, not me." I said, "But son, you are the military." Think about it. The soldiers have asked us for so much money that we don't have it, and the truck exploded far from us so this has nothing to do with us. Even worse, they said if we don't pay they'll kill us and burn down our village. Is this the right thing to do?" Just then an 84 Battalion officer named Capt. Nyo Soe Min came in holding 40,000 or 50,000 kyat in his hand which the other villages had paid him. He spoke suddenly, "Mother, what are you talking about? You don't need to talk, you just need to pay us 50,000 kyat. I control the area here. Whatever I ask for, I have to get it." So I said, "Son, this time we don't have the money. To pay would destroy all of us, so we can't." He said, "You have to pay, if not your whole village will burn." Then an officer from 302 Battalion in Ler Klaw came in and said he'd already warned the villages in his area that they would have to pay if any trucks exploded. I told him, "You're always asking for money, so why don't you just kill everyone in the village while you're at it?" He said, "Okay, if you don't pay we will."

Then I went to their other camp and talked to the camp commander, and he said, "Mother, I'll help you write a letter to the Battalion commander-- but don't give it to him in my handwriting, just copy it down and then give it to him." He said to write, "Battalion Commander, if a truck explodes in our area we will pay but not if it explodes at Tah Paw." Two days later I went to the other camp and gave them the letter. Since then they've said nothing, but now another truck has exploded in our area so we have to pay anyway.

Continued in the next edition of Burma Issues

News Briefs...

SLORC and Laos sign agreements

A delegation of high officials led by General Than Shwe visited Laos on the 9th of June. The Burmese delegation included Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, Foreign Minister-Oh Gyaw, Economic Planning Minister- Maj. Gen. David Abel, Agriculture Minister- Maj. Gen. Myint Aung and Information Minister- Col. Myo Thant.

It was the first foreign visit for Gen. Than Shwe after being appointed as Chairman of SLORC in April 1992. On June 13 the two countries signed three important agreements: 1) demarcation of the 236 km boundary along the Mae Kong River, 2) establishment of a joint border committee, and 3) tourism cooperation.

Closer relations between the neighbors was signals SLORC's successful attempts to break international isolation after it's brutal suppression on the nationwide democracy movement in 1988-- *sources: BP (940610), TN (940614).*

Burma army demolishes mosque

On June 5, Burmese soldiers demolished a mosque for the expansion of a road in Thingan Nyinaung, about 19 Km west of the Burmese border town Myawaddy on the Thai border.

Though local Muslims pleaded with the soldiers to save 70 year old mosque, their requests were ignored. Witnesses claim that the soldiers were heavily drunk. Muslims are now fear the destruction of other mosques along the road-- *sources: BP(940608), Personnel.*

Japan demands release of Suu Kyi

508 of 763 legislators in the lower and upper houses of Japan's parliament signed a letter demanding that the Burmese military release Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Organizers say that the diet also called for the release of an estimated 1,000 other political prisoners, and cession of power to the civilian government.

The letter was addressed to U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Japan has not been as vocal as the United States, and European countries in protesting human rights abuses in Burma. It has continued to deliver aid promised before the junta seized power in 1988 and recently several influential legislators have visited Burma.

Legislator, Shokei Arai, a close ally of Foreign Minister Koji Kakizawa, said that the legislators who have visited agreed that aid should be resumed only if Suu Kyi is released.

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