Burma Issues

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THE ILLUSORY PEACE OF BURMA

by N. Chan

In 1947, just weeks after Burma's independence from Britain, civil war broke out. Since then, it has raged on with peaks and valleys of action year after year. Despite various attempts at talks along the way, a true cease-fire and peace process seems as illusive as ever.

Following the 1988 popular uprising, which ended in a bloody military coup on September 18 of that year, several flickers of hope that the violence might be near an end have broken the darkness. The elections in May of 1990 were one such glimmer which quickly died down when it became clear the military was not going to respect the election results. Then in May of 1992, the Burmese military's newspaper, The Working People's Daily, ran an editorial which appealed to the ethnic insurgent groups throughout Burma to lay down their arms and join the regime in bringing about national reunification. (WPD 920505) As conciliatory as the editorial may have sounded to many foreign observers, to most of the ethnic groups it simply sounded like a repeat of the military's demand that all ethnic armed groups "rejoin the legal fold", which in SLORC-talk means lay down their arms and unconditionally surrender.

(continued page 2)

Villagers fleeing forced labor on the Ye/Tavoy railroad need more than a cease fire. They need a promise that they can safely return home and rebuild their lives without threat of further mistreatment by military forces.

POLITICS

(continued from page 1)

For people who have been struggling many generations already to have a home in which their ethnic and cultural rights are protected, such unconditional surrender sounds more like a death knell than a hope for peace.

To listen to the Burmese military and the ethnic armed groups talk about an end to the hostilities is like listening to two totally different conversations. SLORC's appeals to the ethnic groups to "rejoin the legal fold" have said little if anything about political issues. Instead they have focused on cease-fires and development only. Political issues, they say, must be dealt with in the national convention now going on in Rangoon.

Many of the ethnic groups, on the other hand, say that development is something they can take care of themselves if the military were simply to withdraw from their territory. Also, discussions concerning political issues can not be confined to the national convention since a peace settlement between the groups and the military can never take place if there is not first open and honest discussions on the political issues which have created the civil war in the first place. A guarantee that ethnic cultural rights will be secure and that the military will carry out no more campaigns and massacres against the ethnic people is a precursor to any cease-fires, and is absolutely essential to any peace process. Ba Thin, Prime Minister of the Karen National Union recently said, "Unless the SLORC is ready to talk about a political settlement to the war, a cease fire would be pointless." (BP940911)

What is it that makes the ethnic groups so stubborn on these points? First of all is the fact that since 1947, ethnic languages have been banned from the country's schools in a possible attempt to separate the people from their own identifying language. In the Delta of Burma, for example, the majority of the people are Karen, yet few now can speak their own native language. The Burmese military has also hinted at a policy to slowly eliminate the Karen by only counting as Karen in the national census, those who are both Karen and Christian. Any Karen who is a Buddhist (the majority) are counted as one of the majority Burmans.

A further issue which makes the ethnic groups very suspicious of any "good will" moves by SLORC is simply their experience of having their villages burned, their meagre material goods taken, the women raped, and being forced to serve as slave laborers during the past 45 years by the military. Few families among the ethnic groups have not lost immediate family members or have had their lands and homes confiscated by the military. These painful experiences are not easily forgotten, and before the ethnic forces will lay down their guns, they need evidence that there will never again be a repeat of these violations. SLORC's statement that the political issues must be discussed in the national convention, and not by the military itself which is not a political body, suggests to the ethnic groups that SLORC is not willing to look seriously at these issues and work at solving them. The political issues of the war, they say, are actually the military's strategy of destroying the ethnic identity of the minority groups, and these political issues can not be discussed in the national convention by civilians.

Any peace process in Burma must take these issues into consideration, and international support for the peace process must be created around these realities. A cease fire, while an honorable goal in itself, will not necessarily bring about peace for the peasants of Burma's rural areas, and border development will not necessarily bring about a better life for them if the political roots of the struggle are not first dealt with.

International support for peace in Burma must not become side-tracked by hope for a new constitution to emerge from the national convention, by hope for a dialogue between Aung San Suu Kyi and SLORC, nor by SLORC's "openness" to some democratic changes and a move towards a market economy. Peace for the rural peasants will not necessarily come from these processes. There must be an international guarantee that the military will no longer carry out clandestine operations against the village people hidden far from the eyes of the international community. Only then can these people have the opportunity to live in security and hope. And only then will peace no longer be an illusion.

For more information about the political issues of the civil war, see

"Background to Peace Talks in Burma" by S' Aung Lwin, published by Burma Issues, October, 1992.

"Burma, Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity", by Martin Smith, published by Zed Books Ltd, 7 Cynthia St, London N1 9JF, UK, 1991

Nowhere Is There Safety

Mon refugees from the village of Halockhani, just across the border from Thailand, have recently been the victims of SLORC's deadly game to force the New Mon State Party into a cease fire, and Thailand's determination not to allow refugees to stay on Thai soil any longer. (see "No Asylum Here", Burma Issues Vol 4, No. 8). The following interview with Mrs Me Mee Ong, a 57 year old Mon with seven children, gives added emphasis to the argument that a cease fire will only be effective when it is preceded by a guarantee that no more assaults on the peasant population will ever take place.

"When the Burmese attacked Three Pagodas Pass 6 years ago, we came into Thailand. We spent 4 years in Loh Loe camp, then 5 months ago we moved to Plat Hon Pai. On July 21, I saw the SLORC troops when they arrived at my house. They came inside, they cooked inside my house and they ate. They arrested my son. Two of my sons were there, one ran away and they arrested the other. They also wanted to arrest my husband but he was sick with fever and he couldn't go.

The soldiers fired a gun and ordered everyone to come out of their houses. Then they grabbed them by the hands, took them to the road and made them walk in front of them, firing their guns. They arrested many people. They had to walk 2 by 2, and behind every 3 or 4 people there was a soldier. After they gathered many people, they left for Halockhani. [The villagers were used as a shield in case of an attack on the SLORC troops by Mon soldiers]. I didn't hear the Halockhani fighting because I'm a bit deaf. I just saw people running back from the fighting, so I went to hide underneath another house.

When the soldiers got back, they ordered the people to leave and burnt our houses. There were many soldiers in groups of 4 or 6 all burning houses. When they finished one, they'd go to the next. First they forced us to leave the houses, then they went inside and then they didn't leave until the house was burnt, so I don't know what they stole when they went inside. I cried and pleaded with them, "Please don';t burn my house", but the soldier said, "I have to do it. It is the order of our commander." When they left, I went to my house while it was still burning and with a long bamboo I managed to save a couple of plates and one basin. That's all I could save. Afterwards I stayed near my house and I sat down. That night I slept close to my house on the ground. Some people went to the monastery but others slept like me, on the ground close to their houses. I was so angry at the soldiers, and so depressed. It's horrible, because they took my son and I also lost everything I had. I gathered utensils and house equipment for many years and now I've lost it all.

I didn't feel safe. I was afraid the soldiers would come back. They said they would come back in 3 days, and that "if we see anyone around, next time we'll burn the people." The next morning my daughter came an called me to come here [the refugee camp in Thailand]. My husband walked very slowly with his stick since he is very sick, and our youngest son came with us too.

I don't know why the Burmese attacked Plat Hon Pai. I feel safer here. I'm afraid to go back because the Burmese troops might come back I don't know if this place is really safe or not, but it's safer than there.

(A short time later, Thai troops pressured the refuges to return to the Burmese side of the border despite their pleas that there was so assurance the Burmese troops would not attack them again. (See page 8 of this issue for a related story.)--Source, Karen Human Rights Group, August 24, 1994

"if we see anyone around, next time we'll burn the people."

NAI SHWE KYIN

Nai Shwe Kyin was born in 1922 in the Moulmein District of Mon State. One of the key founders of the Mon Freedom League (MFL) in August 1947, he became its first Chairman. MFL was a legal organization and one of its main aims was to obtain official recognition for the ethnic Mon state. When the Mon representatives, including Nai Shwe Kyin, failed to achieve this at the 1947 Constituent Assembly, a lasting tension was created between the Rangoon government and ethnic Mon nationalists. Today the ethnic Mon leaders' main concerns are for their cultural survival and the right to equal participation in national politics. However, recognition of the Mon state was initially a key factor in their struggle.

In August 1948 the MFL, led by Nai Shwe Kyin, Nai Ngwe Thein and Nai Thein Aung, joined with the Karen paramilitary wing, the National Defence Organization (KNDO) to start the armed revolution. As a freedom fighter, Nai Shwe Kyin took part in the well-known Moulmein and Thaton battles. At that time the other Mon factions were Mon National Defence Organization (MNDO) and United Mon Association (UMA).

In 1952 Nai Shwe Kyin helped to unite the UMF and MFL into the Mon People's Front (MPF), and became a member of its Central Executive Committee. In July 1958, when many members of the MPF surrendered to the Rangoon government, Nai Shwe and some remaining MPF members re-formed as a new organization called New Mon State Party (NMSP). This party is still prominent in the ethnic Mon armed struggle and Nai Shwe Kyin remains Chairman of its Central Executive Committee.

Nai Shwe Kyin has always believed that the ethnic groups of Burma should work together to achieve their legitimate aspirations. In 1959 he was instrumental in uniting the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), the Karen National United Party (KNUP) and NMSP into the National Democratic United Front - the first time in the history of Burma that different rebel ethnic groups had formed an official alliance. In 1963, NDUF and the Burmese military entered into peace negotiations in Rangoon, with Nai Shwe Kyin as one of the chief NDUF delegates. However, the negotiations failed: Nai Shwe Kyin believed the main reason for this was Burmese military's insistence on unconditional surrender. The NDUF was later abolished.

1976 saw the formation of the National Democratic Front (NDF), an alliance of nine separate non-ethnic Burman groups including the NMSP. After the nationwide uprising in 1988, members of the NDF and political allies formed the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), which is now the central political body for all Burma's opposition groups. Nai Shwe Kyin was elected as its Deputy Chairman and he continues to work for the recognition of equal rights for all the ethnic groups of Burma, which of course includes the ethnic Burmans themselves.--Source: Burma Issues Database

THAI ACTION COMMITTEE FOR DEMOCRACY IN BURMA (see page 5)

The Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma was established in 1989. Among other activities, they work at raising Thai public awareness concerning the human rights situation in Burma through a monthly Thai-language news bulletin called "Salween".

During the past five years they have worked with Thai university students and Thai-based NGOs to organize various campaigns in support of the Burma democracy movement. Much of their efforts have focused on challenging the ASEAN constructive engagement policy and on alerting the international community to the plight of refugees living along the Thai/Burma border.

Any individuals or organizations who would like to coordinate campaign activities with TACDB, or who would like to receive their Thai-language news bulletin can contact them through their coordinator:

Ms. Angkana Sriboonrod, PO Box 47, Ratchawithi PO, Bangkok 10408, Thailand

Tel/FAX 662-216-4463

WORKING FOR JUSTICE

Thai human rights organizations have a lot on their minds these days. While trying to focus some of their attention on human rights issues in neighboring countries like Burma and Indonesia, they also have to face the abuse of their own rights by their own government. (see "The ASEAN Way to Human Rights and Democracy", BURMA ISSUES Vol 4., No. 8) Forced eviction of urban and rural poor, exploitation of women and children, abuse of the country's own ethnic minorities, and the lack of movement towards full democracy in Thailand, occupy the time and energies of a relatively small group who continue their full-time commitment to human rights work. As in most countries, it is this small group which also shoulders the burden of working on broader human rights issues affecting their near and distant neighbors.

Concern for refugees and displaced persons from Burma has not escaped the involvement of some of these activists. Representing a variety of human rights organizations throughout Thailand, a group of Thais formed the Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma (TACDB) several years back. While most of the members of TACDB have full time jobs with other human rights organizations, they contribute whatever free time they can spare to work on Burma-related campaigns. Presently, two full-time staff person help take care of the day to day tasks of information gathering, coordinating and organizing.

Ms Rachada Chaisawat, a staff person with the Union for Civil Liberties, is one of those who volunteers time, ideas and creative energy to help meet some of the human rights needs facing the people of Burma, especially those who are seeking safety and/or asylum on Thai soil. Rachada feels it is not the goal of TACDB to solve the problems these people face, but rather to support them in their own positive processes of peace building in Burma. However, much of the work Rachada and TACDB must deal with relates to the terrible plight of Burmese refugees living in camps inside Thailand. They monitor the plight of refugees under threat of forced relocation by Thai military forces and try to intercede with Thai authorities on behalf of the refugees.

During the past few years, Rachada says it has not always been easy to identify what the most appropriate issues to tackle are. The recent ASEAN meeting held in Bangkok was an excellent chance for the various volunteers involved with TACDB to focus more clearly on one campaign goal - ending ASEAN's constructive engagement policy towards Burma. To build up the campaign, several public discussions were held with academics and activists sharing information about the negative effects constructive engagement has for the people of Burma, and offering suggestions for a more appropriate Thai policy towards its neighbor. The campaign culminated with a protest held in front of the Shangri La Hotel during the opening ceremonies of the ASEAN meeting on July 22. While attempting to present Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai with a letter of appeal on behalf of the suffering people in Burma, Rachada and one other Thai volunteer were physically wrestled out of the lobby by Thai police.

Although the ASEAN meeting did not critically discuss constructive engagement, the protest certainly raised the issue clearly. It was an important step in showing the world that constructive engagement is not necessarily seen as the "Asian way" to democracy.

A tremendous amount of work still needs to be done if the Thai policy towards refugees from Burma, and the relationship between Thailand and the military regime of Rangoon, is to be changed. Rachada feels that the focus of a campaign to bring this about should be on refugees. They continue to be the pawns in an economic war which places virtually no importance on the human rights of the grassroots, and therefore they should receive our greatest concern and assistance.

The struggle for human rights can not be confined by national boundaries. As human rights organizations in Thailand are well aware, when friends in Burma suffer, human rights in Thailand suffers as well. Only with a united front can the forces opposed to justice and peace finally be conquered.

Sources in this issues:

WPD = Working Peoples' Daily (Burma), BP = Bangkok Post (Thailand), PK = Puchat Kan (Thailand), SP = Saim Post (Thai), KTT = Khrung Thep Thurakit (Thai), MD = Mathichon Daily (Thai), AWK = AsiaWeek, TN = The Nation, MNRC = Mon National Relief Committee

BURMESE LABOR IN THAILAND

by Naw Lalor

A large immigration problem which has lately received little publicity is that of Burmese economic migrants to Thailand Like many countries all over the world, Thailand is now beginning to attract more and more such migrants from neighboring countries such as Burma and Cambodia, who come seeking the job and economic opportunities which do not exist in their own countries.

Economic migration, however, is not only affecting the poor in Thailand's neighboring states. Well over one million Thais are said to have already left Thailand for other countries in search of better paying jobs, while internally several million rural migrants have flocked to the urban centers. The influx of job seekers, both legal and illegal, from Burma is quickly adding to the economic chaos which is developing.

Presently on average a worker earns approximately US$0.15 per day.

With ASEAN's constructive engagement policy being given more and more credit for helping Burma open its doors to democracy and a market economy, the question of why more and more of Burma's labor force is leaving demands an answer.

According to Col. Abel, Burma's Minister for Planning and Economic Development, Burma has received over US$1,000 million in investments since 1988. In the near future, the amount is expected to double. This is a tremendous increase over pre-1988 foreign investments when few companies dared place any money in an economy which had no foundation of support. If these new investments, brought about by the constructive engagement theory, were truly benefiting the people of Burma, the migration of labor out of the country should decrease rather than increase.

In March 1994, the IFFTU reported that Burma is able to attract all of this investment because of the cheap cost of labor there. Presently on average a worker earns approximately US$0.15 per day. While some foreign companies may pay more than this, it is truly doubtful that the jobs created by the 78 investment projects now functioning in Burma have brought much benefit to the working class.

Thailand estimates that at least 283,500 Burmese have now entered Thailand looking for jobs. Thai officials admit that the reason for this influx is the terrible state of Burma's local economy in which even a university teacher can not earn enough in one month to provide the basic rice needs for a family. These workers, most of whom are illegal, are posing a serious problem for Thai immigration officials.

Burmese migrants are now being divided into five separate categories in order to find some way of dealing with this growing problem. The first category consists of migrants who entered Thailand before March 9, 1976. These laborers will be allowed to stay in Thailand to work, and will be given identity cards which allow them to remain only at the border areas where their jobs are. This category is generally called "displaced persons" by Thai officials, and numbers around 48,000.

The second category consists of approximately 33,000 laborers who arrived in Thailand after March 9, 1976. They have also been given identity cards providing some protection from arrest while working along the Thai/Burma border. A third category is the 50,000 refugees who have more recently fled the military campaigns of the Burmese army and who are waiting in Thailand for security to return to their home areas.

Students who fled the 1988 military coup make up the fourth category. According to Thai statistics, they now number around 2,500. The final category are the 1,500 people who have recently illegally crossed the border seeking daily jobs.

Burmese laborers in the first and second categories are allowed to work in four Thai provinces which border with Burma. These provinces, Ranong, Tak, Chieng Rai and Kanchanaburi, have large plantations as well as large fishing industries which require much manual labor. Getting a job in one of these provinces is not necessarily a simple process. The migrant laborer must first enter the local immigration jail where he or she is finally taken to court and charged with illegal entry. Following the charge, a Thai employer can pay the court fine of approximately US$200 and the laborer is then required to work for the employer in order to pay off the fine.

ECONOMICS

Burmese fishermen working on Thai trawlers

Recently, local businesses along the border have pressured the Thai government to allow more Burmese laborers to enter Thailand as there is a big need for the cheap labor they can provide. Agents are contracted to go into Burma in order to find and bring out the required workers. The agents receive US$20 for each laborer brought out. The workers will then receive from US$20 to US$60 per month as pay, depending on the nature of the work they do. The majority of them work as dish washers in restaurants, house maids, construction workers, fishermen and plantation workers. While their services were once only required in the few Thai provinces which border with Burma, they can now be found all over Thailand, including the urban center of Bangkok. Chon Buri, a province next to Bangkok, recently reported that about 100,000 Burmese were working there, most as service workers in restaurants, night clubs, etc. Many of the women are also forced to work as prostitutes.

In August of this year, the Thai Chamber of Commerce, the Ministry of Industry, and the Bank Association of Thailand, proposed to the Thai government that illegal Burmese workers be given permission to work in Thailand, and that six more provinces be added to the list of those in which Burmese labor can operate legally. While this proposal is still being debated, the Thai Ministry of Interior is calling for a careful survey of all illegal laborers presently in the country. It is possible that they will agree to provide work permits to all of these workers if they stay in the ten provinces where it is felt their labor is most needed.

Problems facing the Burmese workers include very low wages, poor living facilities, and no right to negotiate with the employers for better working conditions. They are not protected by any laws should they have a dispute with their boss.

While employers are pressuring the Thai government to allow more Burmese workers to come into the country, Thai workers are becoming more and more dissatisfied. The presence of Burmese workers who will work for very low pay, is reducing jobs for Thai men and women, and also makes it more and more difficult for Thai labor in these provinces to pressure for better pay and working conditions.

In Mae Hong Son Province of northern Thailand, Mr. Charoenporn Kukhiat, the assistant to the local labor and social service department claims that Burmese laborer in his province has had a serious negative impact on local workers. Employers prefer the illegal workers who work for as little as US$2.40 per day compared to the US$3 to US$350 which the employers would have to pay local Thai workers.

These labor problems will not be easily solved as long as the two countries continue to push for economic development which does not take seriously the human rights of the workers, and as long as the civil war remains unsolved in Burma, more and more Burmese will leave in hopes of better jobs and a better chance of survival.--Sources, PK940203, PK940805, MD 940117, SP 940729, KTT 940219

NEWS BRIEFS

Brang Seng--Brang Seng, chairman of the KIO, died of a stroke on his headquarters in Kachin state on August 8th. Brang Seng joined the KIO in the 1960s. One of Burma's strongest rebel movements, the group draws support from the hill tribes of resource-rich Kachin, which is strategically located between China and India. Last October, the KIO declared a unilateral cease fire with the SLORC. Brang Seng's deputy, Zau Mai, 58, who is also chief of staff of the Kachin guerrilla army, has been named acting KIO chairman.--AWK 940824

Mon Refugees--All the refugees who fled their camp at Halockhani after the Burmese 62nd Light Infantry Battalion torched it on July 21st have now returned. Their return was forced by Thai authorities, who not only cut off Mon access to NGOs, journalists, medicine and food supplies, but also impounded the Mon stockpile of rice, refusing them access until all refugees returned to Halockhani. By 8 September all refugees had returned, but the Thai 9th Army had appointed itself in charge of the rice warehouse, and the transportation blockade was not to be lifted until September 15th. None of the MNRC's requests for safeguards or impartial observers at the camp have been met.--(BP, TN, & MNRC Statement 940910)

Mediations--1)The prominent Buddhist monk U Rewata Dhamma visited Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon in early August, and was himself visited by Gen. Than Shwe. It was reported that a meeting between Aung San Suu Kyi and SLORC will take place before the end of this year.

2)Rangoon's Anglican Archbishop Andrew Mya Han, recently met with KNU leader General Bo Mya at Karen headquarters in Manerplaw. He said he had 'taken on the task of mediator because of the sorrowful plight of the lower ranks of the KNU, who were living in fear and uncertainty'. However, although he was politely received, KNU Prime Minister Ba Thein commented that the Archbishop had brought no new proposals from SLORC, so there was little basis for discussions. There is some doubt about the extent of Mya Han's influence as at least 90% of the Karen people are Buddhists or animists, and even amongst the Christians, very few would be members of the Anglican Church.--(BP 940828 / BP 940911)

Gas Pipeline--A Memorandum of Understanding has been signed by the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) and Myanmar Oil & Gas Enterprise and with the Yadana gas field developers (France's Total and America's Unocal) for Thailand to purchase gas from the Yadana natural gasfield in the Martaban gulf. It is planned that in the next three years the gas will flow 300 kilometres from Burma's Yadana field (which has proven reserves of gas of 5.8 trillion cubic feet) through a pipeline to Kanchanaburi in Thailand, where Egat has planned to build two power plants to use the gas. It is widely believed that the Ye-Tavoy railway, currently under construction with forced labour, is being built to protect the gas pipeline, which passes through territory held by Karen and Mon. There have been threats from the Mon that they may attack the pipeline.--(TN 940905)

BURMA ISSUES

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

AIR MAIL