Burma Issues

OCTOBER, 1994 VOL. 4 NO.10

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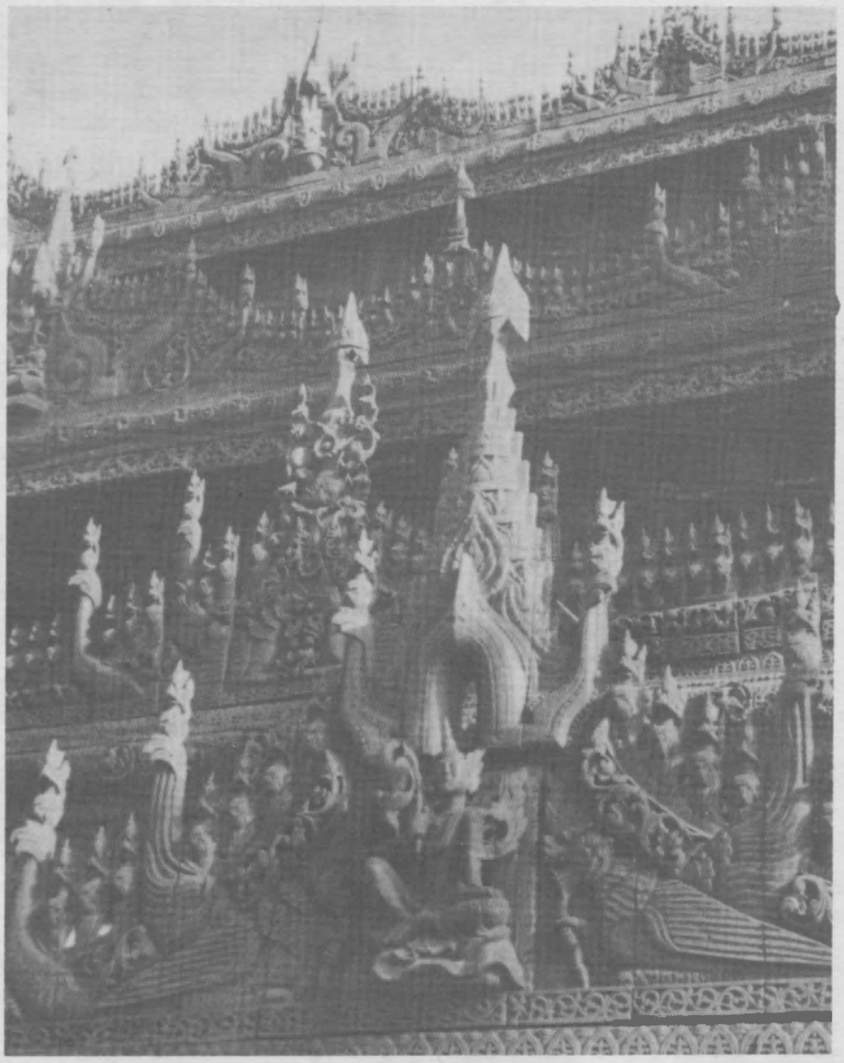

Burma is slowly opening up to tourism. But, while the few tourists who do make the trip are enjoying the scenery and handicrafts, the civil war in the border areas continues. Intracatly carved and decorated temples remain a stark contrast to the suffering of rural villagers who live under the heavy foot of the military.

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THE IMPACT OF TOURISM AND BURMA'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

by Martin Smith

Burma's tourist attractions. Bringing benefits or decay?

By most modern international standards, the current tourism trade in Burma is still negligible. One of the most restricted countries in the world under the former BSPP government, by 1987 visitors had peaked at just over 40,000 a year (as compared with 4 million in neighbouring Thailand). Numbers then collapsed altogether to 5,000 in 1989 following the military's suppression of the democracy uprising, before climbing back slowly towards the 30,000 mark in 1993

This does not mean, however, that the tourism industry is dead. If current government predictions are true, Burma could well be on the brink of a tourism explosion to rival Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and other more prosperous Asian neighbours. With an eye for the well-heeled traveller ("hippies" and "back-packers" will be barred), currency and visa restrictions are being relaxed to allow for four week stays; new air, sea and land routes are being opened up; and 1996 has been declared the "Year of the Tourist" with a projected goal of 500,000 foreign visitors that year. "Tourism is blossoming all over the world. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being made," Lt.-Gen. Kyaw Ba, the SLORC's Tourism Minister, said recently.

Whether foreign tourists will respond in such an enthusiastic fashion while Burma's political crisis still continues is far from certain. But there can be no doubt that international tourism could well one day play a major role in rebuilding Burma's impoverished economy with its abundance of historic, cultural and geographic sites of outstanding international importance. Across the country many communities would hope to benefit.

The implications for freedom of expression and the protection of the Burmese environment are already immense. Currently, there are plans under discussion for ski-resorts around the Hkajabo Razi peak in Burma's far north, luxury hotels and golf courses on tropical islands in the Andaman Sea, and gambling casinos in the Golden Triangle region of the southern Shan State. For the moment, many of these projects appear wildly ambitious, but the rush of multinational interest in tourist development is accelerating nevertheless. According to SLORC officials, over 15 companies from Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Hong Kong have now signed contract for hotel developments worth over US $400 million in investment figures alone.

The question, then, is who will benefit? In government publicity, at least the problem of environmental impact is for once openly acknowledged. "The Government feels that the environmental degradation is caused by the human activities and it recognizes the actual and potential threats posed by uncontrolled tourism in the country," claimed a Tourism Ministry report for 1993. "The Myanmar Tourism Policy is based on preservation of cultural heritage, protection of natural environment, regional development and generation of foreign exchange earnings." To back this up, the National Commission for Environmental Affairs has been ordered to lay down guidelines to control pollution caused by tourism, and there can be little doubt that the desire to protect Burma's unique cultural environment heritage is widespread amongst virtually all Burmese citizens today. In April this year, the Minister for Forestry, Lt-Gen Chit Shwe , also conducted a tour of central Burma with representatives of Lost Frontiers and Tribal and Ethnic Tours of the USA to investigate the prospect of "eco-tourism"

To date, however, few actions have lived up to these words and ideals. Rather than opening up the question of tourism to public debate and participation, a new, highly centralized tourism industry is being built by the SLORC. In June 1990, within days of the NLD's victory in the general election, the Myanmar Tourism Law was unilaterally pronounced by the

SLORC, followed in 1992 by the creation of the powerful Ministry of Tourism and Hotels which is responsible for planning all new tour, accommodation and travel enterprises. Private businesses are technically allowed, but most lucrative new licences and contracts, including foreign joint ventures, are going to companies which are controlled either by the state or the military.

Citizens who object or try to publicize opposition to planning orders face draconian restrictions. Perhaps the most notorious example occurred in April 1990 when over 5,000 inhabitants were ordered by soldiers to move from the site of the ancient capital Pagan and their picturesque wooden homes, some of which were centuries old, were forcibly destroyed. Four people who tried to arrange a public meeting between the villagers and authorities were reportedly arrested and later sentenced to four months' imprisonment in Myingyan jail. As well as being a gross abuse of the fundamental human rights of freedom of association and expression, such practices also contradict the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas (Nairobi, 1976). The Recommendation specifically promotes the concept of "cultural tourism" and the necessity of encouraging active participation by the local population. Indeed, amongst the inhabitants relocated from Pagan were traditional craft-workers with a worldwide reputation for producing high quality lacquer ware.

Similar concerns are now being expressed about other main tourist destinations, including Rangoon and Mandalay, where construction booms are under way to support the first new international hotels. Already the centre of Mandalay is changing fast. Here, tens of thousands of local people have been ordered to donate free labour since December 1993 in order to build a dual carriageway, dredge the eight kilometre moat and finish the restoration of the old Mandalay palace, the last citadel of the Burman kings. "If we refuse, they say they will arrest us for having anti-military tendencies," one labourer told a visiting Western journalist in July.

Under current economic planning, however, it is probably Rangoon that ultimately stands to change the most. In 1993, the first demolitions started of the colonial facade of the downtorwn city area to make way for Singaporean and Thai-backed skyscraper hotels. In deference to Buddhist sentiment, buildings will be limited to a maximum of 27 storeys so that they will not rise above the internationally-revered Shwedagon Pagoda, which lies on a small hill to the north. Many monks and community leaders privately complain, nevertheless, that the historic shape of Rangoon is being irrevocably changed without any consultation with the local people. Nervous residents are also fearful that they could be next to lost their homes and forced to join the over 200,000 citizens already relocated from Rangoon since 1989 to the satellite new towns of Hlaing Thaya and Shwe Pyi Thar.

Equally serious worries are being expressed over land confiscations, cultural despoliation and a complete lack of environmental rights in many ethnic minority regions of the country. Most have been completely closed to foreign tourists for over four decades due to a combination of government policies and the insurgencies; indeed, until 1992 Rangoon was the only official gateway to the country. None the less, with the growing number or cease-fires, a number of frontier posts have been opened under the SLORC's Border Areas Development Programme in the past three years to allow short-term visits by foreigners.

However, any joy in the Shan State over the official reopening of the Mae Sai-Tachilek to Kengtung highway from Thailand was completely dampened by the sudden but still unexplained demolition of the royal Kengtung Palace in November 1991. The historic seat of the tradition *Saw-bwa* rulers, the site has since been left derelict. Local Shans, however, believe that military officials had an ulterior motive. For while large government funds are currently being spent on restoring Pagan, Mandalay, Pegu and the legacy of the former Burman kings in central Burma, they claim that the country's ethnic minority heritage is being deliberately run down. In Kengtung, the objections of senior Shan monks were overruled and prisoners and ethnic Burman workers had to be brought in to complete the demolition after local Shans refused. According to reports reaching Thailand, one Shan magistrate, Sai Sarm Tip, and two friends were arrested and held in captivity for 46 days for allegedly distributing leaflets opposing the destruction of the ornate colonial-style building. "They had no right to pull it down," Tip said. "It belonged to the Kengtung people."

For many Shan citizens, the destruction of the Kengtung Palace now stands as a glaring example of the abuse of state power and the imposition of development or cultural standards without any rights of consultation or redress by the local community. Celebrated in song, the palace has now become a focal point in a reviving resistance movement. "Swallowing our history and resurrecting theirs," headlined a recent article in one underground Shan magazine.

Ironically, one of the main beneficiaries of this resurgence of Shan nationalism has been the 15,000-strong Mong Tai Army led by Khun Sa, which has not yet agreed to peace talks with the SLORC. Long derided as an opium smuggler, since the end of last year Khun Sa has unilaterally declared the independence of the Shan State and ordered a sustained offensive across much of the south-west and central region. Over 500 fatalities were reported on both sides during May-June 1994 alone and the road from Tachilek was once again briefly closed. As with the pipelines to Thailand, it is hard to see how any sustainable development or environmental protection can be achieved until there is a lasting peace between the central government and the people, which allows rights to political participation and public consultation.

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BURMA - DEMOCRACY DENIED

In 1993 two volunteers worked with Burma Issues to produce a multi media education kit about the civil war in Burma (see **BURMA ISSUES**, December 1993 for more details). The kit, entitled "Burma Can Be Freed", contains an exhibition of 10 large color display panels, pamphlets giving an in-depth look at the various topics covered in the panels, a 25 minute slide-show/video which adds atmosphere and emotion to the exhibition site, and a documentary about the effects of foreign investments on the displaced people inside Burma. The exhibition is strongly action oriented, with ideas for campaigns, letter-writing, boycotts, petitions etc.

Students view the exhibition and sign petitions

From April 18 through August 13 of this year, the two volunteers, Carol Tingate and Guy Fordy, carried the exhibition across Australia visiting eleven major urban centers. The tour, called "Burma-Democracy Denied", was launched in Melbourne by John Halfpenny of Victorian Trades Hall Council, Sen. Sid Spindler (Australian Parliamentary Friends of Burma), and Dr. Herb Feith of Monash University.

In the cities they visited, the exhibition was set up in shopping malls, churches, local meeting halls, or schools/universities. Posters publicizing the exhibition were placed around the area inviting people to visit the exhibition and view the videos. Petitions for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, and for SLORC to cease its war against the ethnic groups of Burma were placed on a table for signatures.

Carol and Guy were both very positive about the ability of the exhibition and videos to attract interest and concern for human rights in Burma. At most exhibition sites, television stations came to do interviews as did the local radio stations and newspapers. Much publicity was generated by these interviews which drew more attention to the plight of the people of Burma who continue to suffer human rights abuses of all kinds.

Schools also became creatively involved in viewing the exhibition. In the city of Cairns, a group of 9th year students from Trinity Bay came prepared with a sheet of questions to find answers to in the display. The questions included, "What is constructive engagement?" "What is the SLORC's divide and rule policy?" They spent a good amount of time studying the exhibition, seeking answers to these and other questions. This shows the possibilities for in-depth school tours of the kit.

Another benefit of the exhibition was that many overseas Burmese living in Australia came to study the panels and to talk about their homeland. Many of them have not been home for several decades already. At the exhibition they were able to meet groups working on human rights for Burma and find ways to cooperate with them. All of this helps strengthen the movement for peace and stability in Burma.

According to Guy and Carol, the exhibition proved to be very effective at "...reaching the general public, school and university students, energizing pre-existing Burma action groups, forming new groups and forging links between the Burmese community, NGO's like Amnesty, Community Aid Abroad, East Timor groups, Peace groups, the Trade Unions etc."

The "Burma Can Be Freed" kit has been distributed to action groups in many countries around the world. It can be borrowed, or rented from these groups for a small fee, for use by schools, universities, labor organizations, churches, etc.

If you are interested in using the exhibition, you can contact Burma Issues to find out which organization nearest you has the kit and how you can contact them.

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Arakan State

Rohingya Muslims Killed On March 24, 1994 members of the Burmese military's Western Military Command patrolling the Naf river found some Rohingya Muslims fishing from a small boat. The soldiers tried to extort money from the fishermen, but when they were unable to do so, tied them up with rope and brought them to Balu Khali village in Maungdaw Township.

Eight of the Rohingya fishermen were interrogated and tortured. The soldiers charged them with carrying out clandestine operations rather than simply fishing. The torture lasted for five consecutive days, after which the officer in charge ordered that all be executed. On March 31, all of them were brought out of the camp with their hands tied behind their backs and were ordered to stand in a row. Subsequently, they were all shot by firing squad.

The people of north Arakan have long been targets of whimsical killing by military officers. If villagers report the crime to higher officers, no charges or arrests are ever made. This particular incident, carried out despite the presence of UNHCR officials in Maungdaw, indicates that SLORC will not easily stop their inhuman persecution against the Muslims of Arakan.

Forced Labor The Burmese military junta has established a television receiving center ten miles from Maungdaw. The construction has gone on for several months already on top of a small mountain called Tunnel Hill.

In order to facilitate smooth transportation to the top of the hill, officials have ordered the construction of an all-weather road.

It is understood that the technology for the television and satellite center has been provided by the government of the People's Republic of China, and presently eight Chinese engineers are supervising the installation of machinery.

The border administration has issued a standing order to the villagers to supply about 4,000 laborers routinely for work on the project. Villagers are not provided any food, nor are they given any wages.

Source - Mirror of Arakan, 940401

Chin State

Little information has found its way into the international press about the situation in Chin State, which borders India and Bangladesh. Yet, as in many of the other ethnic States, the civil war continues here with the villagers suffering the brunt of the military's oppressive policies.

Before 1988, no refugees from the Chin State were reported. Following the 1988 popular uprising in the urban centers of Burma, a small number of refugees crossed into India. However, after 1993, the number of refugees began to increase. Presently, there are about 50,000 Chin refugees in India. A few more can be found seeking refuge in Bangladesh.

Why are the Chin villagers now fleeing? Many of them are fleeing forced labor on the construction of a railroad from Pokoku to Tanu on the Indian border. The ground work for the railroad has already been completed using forced labor. Soon workers will be required to lay the teak sleepers and iron rails. Work on the rail road began in 1993.

A second reason villagers are fleeing is to escape forced labor to build Buddhist pagodas in Falan and Tedim Townships of the Chin State. Most of the villagers in this area are Christian. Military officers have forced them to remove the crosses from their churches, and to build pagodas on the hill tops. This program started almost three years ago and is being carried out by SLORC Battalion 83.

Source - Chin National Front, 941003

Shan State

Sai Lone is a 29 year old Shan Buddhist who was arrested by SLORC soldiers and charged with supporting the Mong Tai Army of Khun Sa.. He spent one year in Kengtung prison before being released. Soon after release, he fled to Thailand. Part of his prison experience is as follows:

"There were usually about 200 people in Kengtung Prison. I was in a cell about 7 or 8 feet wide and about 100 feet long, with about 70 other people. Our only job was fetching water for the families of the prison authorities. We weren't given any blankets for sleeping. The floor was wooden planks and we just had to sleep on that. For a toilet there were a couple of oil drums sawed in half with 2 planks on top and we had to use these. We just had to go to the toilet right there, and eat in the same room.

At 8 a.m. they gave us a bowl of rice and yellow-bean soup. In the evening we were given some rice and rotten vegetables, rotten papaya, or something inedible like that. Every day people got sick because of malnutrition. People died of malaria, diarrhea and other diseases. There's a hospital in the compound but they don't look after the prisoners there, and there's no medicine there. People are only sent to the hospital when they're about to die. Every 2 or 3 days someone died."

Source - Karen Human Rights Group, 940820

FROG EATING FROG, FISH EATING FISH

commentary by CAC

It is all too easy for people concerned with human rights and peace to paint with a broad, undiscerning brush the line between the oppressors and the oppressed in Burma. The oppressed are civilians, poor and mute, while the villains wear camouflage and khaki, tote guns and are referred to by the catch-all label, "SLORC." However, a deeper understanding of militarism in Burma reveals that oppression is a social problem that affects soldiers and civilians alike . Thus, the civil servants who carry out abusive government policy (oppressors?) do so in fear of what will happen to them and their families if they defy that military authority (or oppressed?). Everyone suffers because the military's physical might is projected onto governmental, political, social and cultural domains, creating a climate of intimidation and fear.

This is the root of social oppression in Burma, a pattern that stretches back to long before SLORC, Aung San Suu Kyi, or the 1990 elections became the foci of international concern for Burma. Sustainable peace in Burma depends primarily on the people's ability to dismantle and discard the military's grossly disproportionate influence over all aspects of public and private life.

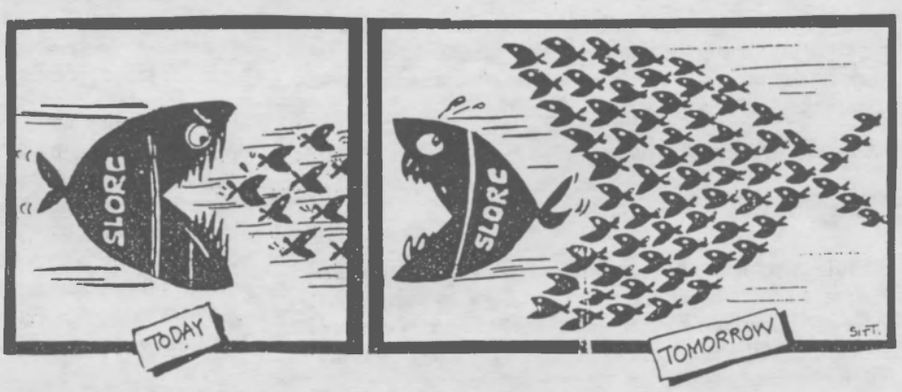
On June 6, 1994, 11 Burma army privates serving on the Karen State front line shot dead their non-commissioned officers and defected to rebel forces. One of these private's testimony, excerpted here courtesy of the Karen Human Rights Group, paints a picture of ordinary soldiers' lives, and helps us realize that oppression in Burma is a pervasive disease fostered by excessive military authority over all of Burma's people, soldiers and civilians alike. The young private's name, hometown and other facts about himself and his military career are withheld to protect his family.

I was staying in my parents' house when I was forced to join the army two years ago, in 1992. None of us who arrived here were volunteers-- we were all forced. Inside Burma, one person from each house has to join the army. If they don't [want to], they're forced. So none of us came here as volunteers. None of us.

The ward authorities already have lists of which houses have boys and which don't. The houses which don't have boys are forced to send a woman to work for them for five or six months sifting beans, then they're let go. The boys who are taken have to become SLORC soldiers for five years. Some have already served their five years, but then they're still not allowed to leave. Those who go and get killed at the frontline, their families don't get any compensation. It's as though the SLORC is strangling the people to death.. Some of the rich people refused to go. Personally, I saw about twenty of them arrested. Also, some people have only one child and he has to take care of his parents when they get old, so he doesn't want to go in the army. These people are sent to jail, not just for days or months , but for two or three years. After that if they can pay the warden they're released, but if they can't they're not released, they're sent to work on the railroads the SLORC is building.

This was my second time in the army. At that time I was a student, and when I saw soldiers I wanted to wear the uniform, so I joined. I was at [a Karen front line post] for about 5 years. I was wounded at the front line, I got severe malaria and then I heard that my mother was dying, so I asked permission to go home but they refused, so I ran away.

[I rejoined as a new recruit, without the army knowing I was a deserter.] The NCOs [non-commissioned officers such as corporals and sergeants] beat us a lot during training, and they always abused our food- they put sand in our rice and we had to eat it. Saturdays and Sundays we had to work hard cutting firewood and splitting bamboo, not for the recruits but for the NCOs' personal houses. Anytime we did anything not to their satisfaction they beat us. They have no patience, they just grab a piece of bamboo or whatever they see and beat the recruits with it. Some recruits had their hands and legs broken this way during training.



From FIST NEWSLETTER, Feb-March, 1994

I was sent [to a different battalion near another front line area]. When I was a soldier before 1988 the living conditions were alright, but since then the food, clothing, medicine and everything else have gotten worse. The situation is getting so bad because the higher authorites steal everything. For example, now if you get malaria instead of giving you a whole pill of chloroquine they only give you a small piece of one. If you have money you can buy medicine for yourself, but some sick soldiers who didn't have money shot themselves. After they killed themselves the officers and NCOs reported that they died in battle. Now you don't see many experienced soldiers in the battalion, just many new recruits always coming, and many are still coming.

We never got full salary, they always cut it for things like "bridge and road construction" and "social welfare," cut for the officers and so on. We only got three to four hundred kyat per month [out of an official salary of 750 kyat monthly]. The villagers often felt sorry for us and gave us some rice. The best food we got was the beanpaste and fishpaste we got from the villagers. Then if we were going to attack the Karen army the officers ordered us to catch villagers to carry our supplies, but we didn't want to do it because the villagers had helped us and we felt pity for them. But if we didn't do it, the officers said, "You have contact with the ringworms [derogatory name for Karen soldiers]," arrested us and put us in the camp jail. Me, I was beaten on my back with an iron bar for this. The Warrant Officer hit me 20 or 30 times with the bar and my back was cut open and bleeding- I still have the scar. Then they kept me tied up in the hot sun all day without food or water, with my legs in stocks and nothing but short pants on. Sometimes if the villagers see this, they come and pretend to work in the field and sneak a bottle of water to the soldier because they feel sorry for him.

We weren't allowed to listen to the radio or read any newspapers. We were allowed to write our families but the officer reads the letter before sending it and if there is anything written against them the soldier is punished. For example, two privates were beaten and put in the camp jail for four to six months, accused of rebelling against the State. Their letters home had complained about the food, that there were no good cheroots to smoke, etc. The officers said, "We don't starve you, Why do you write like this?" We didn't get leave, not even once a year. Sometimes a soldier's family came to visit them, so before the visit the officer gives the soldier a new uniform and good food for a few days, but after the visit they take the clothes back and the food is deducted from the soldier's salary at the end of the month.

Any of our own soldiers who were seriously wounded were killed. If it isn't serious, if they can walk or if it's easy to take them, then they're taken back. If not, they're killed. The company commander orders this. When I saw things like that happen I felt very sad. Our own soldiers, we must bring them back but we didn't. It's a crime. It's like frog eating frog, fish eating fish.

If we captured Karen soldiers we never kept them alive. We killed them. The NCOs didn't even interrogate them, they just said, "Pray to your God," and killed them with a bayonet, then beheaded them. Once we found a wounded Karen soldier and they stepped on his throat to kill him. Other times they killed wounded Karen soldiers with a bayonet. If they suspected any villagers of being in contact with the Karen National Liberation Army they summoned them, and they never used a gun- just a bayonet. They had no real evidence- if they didn't like the look of a civilian they'd just accuse him of being connected to the KNLA and kill him.

Ever since I arrived I wanted to come over to the KNLA or the Burmese students. Our officers told us, "If you go to the KNLA they'll cut your throat," but I didn't believe it because they were always lying to us and we'd got to know and trust the Karen villagers. I always saw the army capturing old villagers, beating them and making them carry heavy loads, and it made me feel bad. Then one day the Warrant Officer stole some of our money and said it was for his alcohol. He said, "If you don't like it I challenge you to do something." Another day, some of the soldiers went to get some more salt for their rice, and just for that they were beaten and kicked. So that night I told the others, "Get ready, tonight we'll shoot them and go to the Karen, it has to be better there." We are the first from this area, but a lot more will come now that we've shown them the way. The soldiers are all weak and thin and their officers will never let them go home, so many will come here.

SELECTIVE CONTRACTING LAWS

In **Burma Issues**, Vol. 4 No. 8, (August 1994), we carried an article about Selective Contracting Laws in the United States. The article suggested that people interested in learning more about these laws, or in starting a movement using these laws in your city or state should contact the Investor Responsibility Research Center Inc. (IRRC) In fact, the IRRC is an independent, non-partisan research institution which reports on a variety of corporate responsibility issues, but does not take positions on those issues and is not part of any campaign.

A group that does support selective contracting aimed at corporations active in Burma is CPPAX, based in Boston. CPPAX is working with Rep. Byron Rushing on the bill mentioned in our August article. Readers can contact the Peace and New Priorities Committee, CPPAX, 25 West St., Boston, Massachusetts 02111, USA. Their telephone number is 617-426-3040.

IMPORTANT ITEMS OF THE MONTH

Leaders Talk

In the first high-level encounter since her house arrest more than five years ago, Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed to meet with Gen. Than Shwe and military intelligence chief Khin Nyunt on September 20. Pictures showing all three, smiling, were telecast on state TV in Rangoon. No details of the discussion have been released. The meeting has been greeted with cautious optimism internationally, but there is broad consensus that the SLORC will need to hold a substantive dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi before it can expect credibility at home or abroad.

(BP 940921)

Gas Pipeline

Total SA of France, Unocal Corp. of the US and the state energy companies of Thailand and Burma signed an agreement in mid- September to build a natural-gas pipeline from Burma's Yadana offshore gasfield to the Thai border. Under the terms of the agreement, the Petroleum Authority of Thailand will pay $400.8 million annually for a delivery rate of 15.8 million cubic meters of natural gas a day. The total cost of developing the gas field and building the pipeline is estimated at $1 billion.

(AWK 940909)

Thailand condemned by Amnesty International

AI has expressed concern that the treatment of asylum-seekers in Thailand does not meet minimum international standards, and that some refugees are subject to detention, ill-treatment and forcible return to countries where they may face serious risk of human rights violations. Thailand has to date not acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

(AI Report :"THAILAND - Burmese and other Asylum-Seekers at Risk", Sept. '94

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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