

Burma Issues

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VISIT MYANMAR

BUT NOT

SUU KYI



A section of the Ye/Tavoy rail road. All work, including clearing the area of trees and brush, building up the rail road bed, and laying the lines is done by hand. Villagers are forced to do the work with no pay, and even food is not provided. Much of the line is now growing back under brush as this picture shows. It is rumored that officials have now decided to move the line to a different location.

Information for Action +++ International Campaigns for Peace +++ Grassroots Education and Organizing

TOURISM

VISIT MYANMAR BUT NOT SUU KYI

by C. Fink

American alumni groups have learned the hard way that visiting Burma comes with a price. They must promise that they will not meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and pro-democracy leader. Anyone who makes plans to see her is not allowed into the country.

The Stanford alumni group which had planned to go to Burma in late January has had to cancel their trip. Kyaw Ba, the Minister of Tourism, revoked the landing permit for their chartered plane after he learned that they had written to Suu Kyi.

A letter from Patrick Macleod of Abercrombie and Kent, the travel agency organizing the tour, to the local travel agent in Rangoon states:

"It looks like the guy at Stanford has sent a letter to Aung San Suu Kyi asking her to speak to the group - anyway he now realizes what a mistake he has made!!"

The Stanford group tried to appeal by promising Kyaw Ba that they would not meet with Suu Kyi after all. Duncan Beardsley, the Director of Stanford's Travel/Study Programs, wrote to Tin Tun, the representative of the travel agency handling arrangements in Rangoon, asking him for assistance in reinstating the landing permit.

"I have already written to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi withdrawing my invitation. I wish to emphasize in no uncertain terms that neither I nor any of the passengers or staff will contact this person," said Beardsley on December 22, 1995.

In his letter to Suu Kyi, Beardsley wrote, "Further to my November letter inviting you to meet with the Stanford Alumni, I am withdrawing my invitation due to unforeseen circumstances." Beardsley did not tell Suu Kyi the real reason for the change of plans.

The Stanford group was not the only alumni group which was denied entry

by the Burmese government. The University of Michigan group was also told that they could not come because of rumored contacts with Suu Kyi. Apparently, they were also considering giving her an award.

TCS Expeditions, which was coordinating the travel arrangements in the States, wrote to Abercrombie and Kent to say that, "we were able to get in touch with University of Michigan right away and they say no contact was ever made from their school and there are no plans to present her with an award."

Because there was no written evidence of contact between Suu Kyi and the Michigan group, Kyaw Ba reinstated the landing permit for their chartered plan.

Macleod asked the Rangoon travel agency to reassure the proper Burmese officials. He wrote, "you have my 100% guarantee that no one from USC/Michigan will make contact with Aung San Suu Kyi while in Burma."

Since Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest in July, 1995, the Burmese government has reacted unfavorably to official meetings with Suu Kyi. When the Malaysian Ambassador announced that he was organizing a luncheon for Suu Kyi and ASEAN ambassadors in Rangoon, the Burmese government demanded that he cancel the event.

Foreign officials going into Rangoon have also been warned that they must choose between Suu Kyi and the SLORC. They would not be allowed to meet with both.

Now the Burmese junta has stepped up the pressure. Even tourists cannot meet with Suu Kyi.

The directors of the alumni groups seem unperturbed by the junta's actions. They have been willing to make whatever concessions necessary as long as their trips are permitted.

Whether the members of the tour groups are aware of the restrictions being placed on them is unclear. Perhaps not all of the group members would be willing to travel to Burma if they knew more about how the military junta really operates.

One cycling group which did make it to Burma has also experienced problems. Although they had official permission to bicycle around central Burma, they were stopped by local military authorities once they arrived in the countryside. The reason given: local security. It seems that the officials were far more worried about what the cyclists might see than about any dangers they might face.

The group of Americans and British cyclists were detained, then thrown into trucks, and sent back to Rangoon. Half of the members immediately left the country in disgust. The others flew up to Mandalay, but were then told that they were not allowed to go beyond the city limits.

In another recent incident, two Americans flew to Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, with official permission from Rangoon. When they arrived in Myitkyina, the local authorities said they could not enter the town. They were ordered to fly back to Rangoon, but since there were no more flights that day, they were forced to spend the night on tables in the airport lounge with armed guards watching over them.

The argument has been made that tourism can help open up Burma politically. However, given the way that the Burmese authorities have handled tourism so far, it is hard to imagine how tourism could play a positive role in bringing about political change.



Tourism and the Struggle for Peace

From **SEEDS OF PEACE** Vol 12, 1995

The world is discovering Burma. Businesspeople, international organizations, and tourists are all rushing to invest, to "help", or just to see this exotic land so long hidden from their eager eyes. Having basically been closed to the world since General Ne Win's military coup in 1962, Burma is indeed ripe for the picking. Investors are drawn by the fact that its natural resources, including vast teak wood forests, minerals, and marine life, remain basically intact and unexploited while the seas and forests of its neighbours lay in ruins. Isolated to a large extent from global trends and changes, few NGOs exist inside the country and development programs are almost non-existent, thus attracting international organizations who need new areas in which to establish their work. Vast portions of the country have not been seen by foreign eyes for several decades already, making it a tourist's paradise. Burma is, indeed, opening up. And while the exchange of ideas and information between countries and peoples, which can be facilitated by investments, international NGO presence, and tourism may be good and necessary for growth and development, the process for how this comes about is crucial for the positive long-term development of the nation and all its people.

Tourism is now playing an increasingly important role in Burma's relationship to the outside world. Following his military coup, General Ne Win closed the country off from most contact with the international community, allowing few Burmese out and few foreign visitors in. From 1962 until 1988, Burma had only around 20 hotels throughout the country with approximately 800 rooms. Tourists could spend only one week in the country and were allowed access to a very few carefully selected areas. Numbers of tourists arriving each year numbered only in the thousands. Burma slowly disappeared from the eyes of the world. Few people knew

what horrors a very large percent of the population were living under.

The 1988 democratic uprising forced the military to make some major changes. Pictures smuggled out of the country of soldiers shooting down unarmed demonstrators raised international concern. As more and more information reached televisions and newspapers around the world, a growing protest against the military's brutality grew. In order to keep from being totally isolated economically and politically by the international community, and in an attempt to soften the Burmese people's determination to end one-party military dictatorship, the military regime, now known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Slorc), began making cautious moves to open the country. Foreign companies were invited to invest in Burma, and tourism was encouraged. Through these foreign investments and foreign visitors, Slorc quickly began bolstering their sagging economy. However, all "liberalizing" schemes of the Slorc were carefully orchestrated to strengthen the military's grip, and to confuse and divide the opposition movement both inside and outside the country.

The presence of so many foreigners suddenly entering the country has also presented problems for the Slorc. The local urban populations, so long isolated and oppressed, gain hope and courage from the presence of foreign eyes and ears. The threat of another major uprising became a growing concern for the military.

To deal with this threat, both in the urban areas and in the distant rural areas, Slorc began systematically and energetically modernizing and expanding its military forces. New recruits were conscripted with the goal of strengthening the armed forces from 150,000 to 500,000, and large arms deals were made with China and a few other arms-dealing countries for new fighter planes, artillery, and navy ships.

Foreign exchange brought in by foreign companies and tourists flowed into the coffers of the military rather than into the empty pockets of the people. Suffering throughout the country became worse. Many urban people were forcibly relocated to new satellite towns in order to "beautify" the cities. Thousands of people were recruited as free labor to prepare the country's tourists sites. Income for the people did not increase, but the prices of necessary food commodities continued to climb.

Nowhere was the suffering greater than in the border areas of the country. It is estimated that more than one million rural people have been forcibly displaced throughout the countryside in Slorc's war to destroy all indigenous struggles for self-determination. Free-fire zones have been created, preventing poor farmers and their families from returning to orchards, gardens, and rice fields to harvest the food they so desperately need for survival. Rape of women and children, extrajudicial arrests and executions, forced portering, torture, and other forms of ethnocide have been on the increase in many border areas since 1988.

These are some of the political and economic realities which continue to plague Burma and her people. Unfortunately, as in many other countries, tourism in Burma tends to operate outside these economic and political realities. Tourists live in comfortable hotels, ride buses to the temples, shop in government-operated stores, and dine in air-conditioned comfort. They see little of the suffering going on just behind the façades erected by the military to separate truth from fiction. When these tourists return to their homes, they will tell stories of a happy, beautiful people, nowhere nearly as desperate and downtrodden as Amnesty and Asia Watch reports would have us believe.

Alternative tourism may be an option. People in Rangoon and Man-

PEACE

dalay have a chance to become tour guides, and perhaps they can provide a deeper analysis to some of the visitors of the economic and political realities facing the people. However, the number of tourists who will benefit from this service will be extremely small, and generally will be made up of those visitors who are already aware and concerned. The vast majority of the tourists will rather participate in the guided tours which the military organizes, and they will learn virtually nothing which might open their eyes to what really is happening in Burma today.

Alternative tourism will not only be hindered by strict government controls over all people involved in the tourism business, but will also be made almost useless by the strict control over where tourists will be allowed to travel. Despite perhaps receiving some alternative information from their more progressive tour guides, these alternative tourists will not be allowed to visit villages which have been burned to the ground, interview groups of laborers forced to build roads and clean up tourist sites, nor photograph the scars on the victims of military offences in the border regions. In the end, they will simply hear a few stories from concerned people in Burma, but will probably have learned little that they could not already get from the huge volumes of materials documenting the lives and sufferings of the victims of Burma's civil war.

There is an on-going debate among international Burma action groups as to whether tourism to Burma should be encouraged or boycotted and they have been looking for some guidance to this debate from the people of Burma themselves. However, recommendations coming from Burma are often contradictory, depending on just who is making them.

Slorc is, of course, fully in support of tourism. They have designated 1996 as "Visit Myanmar Year", hoping it will bring in up to 500,000 foreign visitors and millions of dollars. From April 1994 to March 1995, 100,000 visitors made it to Burma leaving behind approximately US\$30

million. This gives Slorc cause to be assured their tourism industry will remain the largest foreign exchange earner for the country, and will guarantee them the funds they need to keep their military well paid and well armed.

A small number of wealthy urban people in Rangoon and Mandalay are also deeply involved in developing tourism. Most, if not all of them, have very close relations with Slorc officials so have access to money for investments. They can participate in joint ventures with foreign companies to build hotels, or operate tour companies. Presently about US\$600 million is being invested in the building of new hotels. These local investors stand to make significant profits should tourism in Burma be successful.

Another group of urban people who are somewhat supportive of the growing tourist industry are educated, middleclass young people who have been involved, at least to some degree, in the struggle for democracy in Burma. Many of them have friends who remain in prison, and all of them still have clear memories of the terrible events of 1988. They have the possibility of becoming tour guides. For them, tourism is a chance to earn a little extra cash and to tell tourists about some of the political and economic realities of their country. They also believe that the presence of foreign tourists will make it more difficult for the military to arrest people, or to suppress moves towards more democratization of the country.

Finally, many of those who have been most victimized by Burma's long civil war, want a full boycott of tourism. Living in the border areas and deep in the jungles, they know that none of the tourist dollars flowing into the country will trickle down to them. They also know that the tourists will never see them nor help protect them from the daily abuses they face from the military. Many of them fear that tourism may even increase their suffering since it will help deflect international attention away from their isolated regions to those areas to which visitors can easily travel. Thus

they fear that they may end up being even more marginalized, and that the Burmese military will be able to carry out harsher abuses against them with less international protest. For these people, tourism is a curse rather than a potential support.

In the final analysis it is left to each individual to decide for themselves whether or not they will visit Burma. One of the factors which will most influence this decision will be just whose voice in Burma they will listen to for advice. Will they listen to the voice of the military regime which says all is well and peaceful in the country, and who stand to make huge profits from these tours? Will they listen to the voices of those few who will be granted the right to act as tour guides because they are in the right place at the right time, and have the ability to make proper contact with the authorities? Or will they choose to listen to those who have been victimized for so long by the Burmese military, and who stand to gain nothing but more severe suffering by this new business entering the country?

In a struggle for justice, human rights, and true peace there is no neutral ground. We either support and encourage the people's process for bringing about this peace, or we stand as an obstacle. Businesspersons, NGOs, and tourists must recognize this as they decide their relationship with Burma, her military junta, and her people. Good intentions will not be enough, and will not guarantee that our involvement or our presence will help the worst victims of Burma's civil war along their path to an authentic and lasting peace.



INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

CAROLING FOR PEACE

Synapses, a Chicago USA based organization of people committed to helping build societies of peace and justice throughout the world, have a tradition of Christmas caroling which takes well-known Christmas songs and adapts them to reflect urgent concerns of the day. The following is their rendition of Winter Wonderland created for the justice and peace struggle in Burma.

Winter Wonderland (adapted)

Bullets ring, are you listening?
In the streets, sorrow's glistening?
Though Burma's a fright
CEOs on this night
from Unocal and Pepsi
count their dough.

Slorc says, "Come,
see our country."
Tourists pay lots of money.
But tourists won't see
the real tragedy:
peasants forced to work under the gun.

In the highlands
Muslim women cry out,
witnesses to murder

rape and theft.
Soldiers come to
steal their food
and beat them.
Are Unocal
and Pepsi people deaf?

Burma cries out for freedom.
Aung San Suu Kyi
wants to lead 'em.
But corporate pork
just props up the Slorc,
Unocal and Pepsi pay the bill.

If you wish to join in the many creative activities of Synapses, contact them at: Synapses, 1821 W. Cullerton, Chicago, IL 60608.



ACADEMICS AND SLORC

A partial list of American universities known to be participating in Burma tours include:

- University of Arizona,
- University of Southern California,
- University of Minnesota,
- University of Michigan,
- University of Washington,
- Yale,
- Indiana University.

The Alumni Association of Northwestern University in Chicago has cancelled its tour to Burma.

Source: Synapses Messages, Fall, 1995



HUMAN RIGHTS

STILL LIVING IN FEAR

This month, several articles in this publication discuss issues related to tourism in Burma. Visitors to Burma are on the increase, and some people feel that the presence of visitors will improve the human rights situation. While any easing of abuses against the long-suffering people of Burma would indeed be welcomed, there is yet little evidence that tourism is having such an effect. Reports, especially in the border areas of the country, continue to provide evidence that suffering continues as usual, and in some areas is even increasing. Human rights abuses in Burma are structural in nature, and it is a change in these dehumanizing political, economic, and social structures, not an increase in foreign visitors, which will finally bring an end to rape, pillage, forced relocation, and forced labor throughout Burma. The following stories summarize a few of the reports received over the past month, and provides further evidence that peace is yet a long ways off.

Arakan State

Ganantaung Village, inhabited by Rakhine nationals of Ponnagyun Township in Rakhine State, has become another focal point of the human rights violations by Slorc troops. In the name of counter-insurgency operations, this small and peaceful village was virtually turned into a concentration camp by Company 3, of Battalion 376. For nine harrowing days starting on November 3, Ganantaung and five other neighbouring villages were held under threats and violence.

The apparent reason for this violence was an encounter between the Slorc troops and the Arakan Liberation Army (ALA), which is the guerilla wing of the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), at a spot two miles away from Ganantaung. In the ambush, two Slorc soldiers were killed and a few others injured. In a frenzy or retaliation, the Slorc troops adopted means of violence including physical torture, threats and rape against innocent villagers. Two villagers were killed and at least fifty were injured. Among the injured, ten suffered from fractured ribs, sixteen from broken arms, and others received head injuries, cuts and bruises.

According to a visitor to the area, all the villagers, including women and children were restricted within the confines of the villages for many days. Their appeal to go search for food was refused by the soldiers. Many became sick.

Five women were reported to have been raped, and many young girls mo-

lest. A 29-year-old nurse was severely beaten up when she resisted being raped. Another woman received a serious head injury when she tried to save her sister from an attempted rape.

Source:

THE ARAKAN FORUM, December 1995

Chin State

On the 4th of October, 1995, Captain Than Taih, Commander of the Slorc post in Lailenpi of Matupi Township, Chin State marched with

The sergeant then told him that villagers have no right to make suggestions and rather must do only what they are told to do by the soldiers.

twenty soldiers and 20 porters into Sabawngpi Village. The villagers, all of whom are poor farmers, were forced to purchase the food rations the soldiers were carrying. Being very poor, the villagers tried to collect all of the money available in the village to buy these rations because they were afraid of being beaten and abused if they did not.

Once they had gathered enough money to buy the soldiers' rations, the soldiers then demanded that the villagers provide, without pay, rice, pigs and chickens for their meal. There was no way the villagers could refuse to give up their precious livestock and food supplies.

On October 6, the soldiers took eight villagers as porters and marched to another village nine miles away. Most of the villagers were not at home as they must stay in their fields during the months of October and November to harvest their crops. Captain Than Taih had his troops spread out and move into homes in the village.

When one sergeant and his group tried to occupy an empty house, a villager by the name of Mr. Va U asked them to stay in a house different house since this one was locked up. He urged them to stay in a house where villagers were at home. The sergeant immediately hit him hard in the face and knocked him down. Other soldiers hit him soundly in the back with their rifle butts. The sergeant then told him that villagers have no right to make suggestions and rather must do only what they are told to do by the soldiers. He threatened even more violent treatment if the villagers said anything more. Mr. Va U was unable to eat for three days due to the internal damage done by the beating.

The soldiers remained in this village for about one week during which time the villagers had to provide them with rice, pigs, chickens and money. When they finally left, they forced

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This photo shows a section of the infamous Ye/Tavoy railroad which is being built with forced labor. All of the work must be done by hand. The photo was taken during the rainy season when work stops briefly. It is now rumored that, because of extremely poor planning and engineering, the work already completed is falling apart. A new route may soon be selected, and workers will have to start all over again.

eight villagers to serve them as porters for the continuation of their march.

Source:

CNF Information Service

Karen State

(The following report was made by a visitor to villages north of the border town of Myawaddy, opposite the Thai town of Mae Sot. The names of villages and people have been omitted in order to protect those whose stories are told here.)

On November 20, I visited a village on the Meh Bleh River. This was a village I had visited some years earlier, but now could not even recognize it because it had changed to drastically. Approximately ten years ago, the village was quite large with a well kept road, houses and a school. At that time there were at least 50 households living here. Now, however, it hardly looks like a village at all. When I entered it, it was deathly quiet. The houses were unkempt, and many appeared to be empty. I talked with some of the village people I could find and they said that now only 18 house-

holds still live here. A few of the people have fled into Thailand, while the others are hiding deep in the jungle. One villager told me that now they must build two or three houses in different parts of the jungle so that when the soldiers come, they can quickly find shelter some place else. All of their household items have been hidden in caves so the Slorc soldiers can not steal them.

From 20 to 26 November, I travelled around the area and saw that many fields were not being worked. People said that since the start of 1995 it has been very difficult to stay and get food because of the soldiers. That is why so many have fled away.

Older people want to stay and farm as this is their life, but now it is almost impossible for them to survive. Parents hope for better times, but if the youth lose their determination to help their families work the fields, then happiness will be lost. If I saw young babies, I felt great pain and pity as they are growing up in the midst of sicknesses and oppression. They have no opportunity to learn. When I saw all of this I was angered, but could do nothing.

On December 2, two groups of village women passed through the village I was visiting. Some were grandmothers carrying children on their backs and woven trays on their heads. They were making trip after trip from their village into the hills, carrying all of their household possessions. I asked one old grandmother why they did this. She said, "The soldiers take everything, and leave us with nothing. Thus, it is best for us to carry everything away and hide it.

As night fell, I saw them leave again. They went slowly and quietly from the village into the night. There is nothing left now in the village.



NEWS BRIEFS

IMPORTANT NEWS ITEMS

At the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok during the month of December, Burma signed the Nuclear Free Zone Treaty and promoted their case to gain observer status. That status has since been granted.

Eighty six NLD delegates attended the first day of the December session of the Convention for a new Constitution in Rangoon. After walking out en masse, they were officially expelled from further proceedings.

The UN General Assembly passed a resolution deploring human rights violations in Burma.

Khun Sa has made a peace deal with the Slorc which includes provision for MTA troops to join the Burmese army and guarantees for his personal safety. The deal follows a month of intensive negotiations and

the 'retirement' of Khun Sa. The withdrawal of MTA troops brings Burmese troops to the Thai border and into the disputed zone of Doi Lang, destroying the previous Shan 'buffer zone'.

DKBA activity in Karen camps on the Thai side of the border has increased and a number of deaths reported. Sho Klo camp is being dismantled and moved further into Thailand, and other camps may follow - a step which Thai authorities are calling a security measure.

Slorc troop build ups in Karen villages on the Burmese side of the border have recently been reported, suggesting the possibility of a major offensive against the KNU. A cease fire with, or victory over, the KNU

would give the Slorc control over the entire Thai/Burma border.

On December 21, 1995, the BBC reported that around 10 French "mercenaries" left for Burma to take care of protection for the 63-km-long gas pipeline that the French oil company Total is building. Apparently finding recruits was not so easy as many French mercenaries in the past have been very sympathetic to the cause of the ethnic insurgencies in Burma. Several of the young recruits are mine disposal experts who served under UN colors in former Yugoslavia.



BURMA ISSUES
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