BURMA ISSUES

December, 1996 Vol. 6 No. 12

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LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

photo by Nic Dunlop

If there is one lesson from 1996 to carry into the new year it is this: war, peace, justice and oppression live and die a little bit at a time. There are no watersheds, no quick fixes nor disasters from out of the blue.

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

As 1996 gives way to the new year, Burma turns another page on its thick calendar of struggle and strife. It is both an appropriate and important time to reflect on the year's events and draw lessons for the future.

by CAC

ASEAN

December 1995 left an ominous suggestion of ASEAN membership for the new year. Burma was granted observer status at the annual ASEAN Summit in Bangkok. Membership has long been a goal for the ruling military junta, yet has proved elusive despite strong economic ties to Thailand and Singapore and ideological defense from Malaysia, all members of the regional political organization. In 1996, one aspect of the ASEAN debate was Burma's participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a broad grouping of ASEAN members, selected Asian countries and non-Asian dialogue partners. Participation in the ARF seemed to presage an announcement that full ASEAN membership was soon to follow.

However. The United States, and perhaps to a lesser extent the European Union, voiced diplomatic protest. In June, two US envoys on a diplomatic mission to Thailand warned that Burma's premature inclusion in ASEAN could destabilize the region. Burma's state-run media replied with vehement rhetoric about American neocolonialism. A thin ideological wedge was tapped into ASEAN. Although Thailand has been a tacit sponsor for Burma's membership, it has a strong economic and political allegiance to the United States. Malaysia, by comparison, with a stronger economy and greater political autonomy, is at the forefront, in the person of Prime Minister Doctor Mahathir Mohammed, of the debate to redefine human rights and democracy within an ostensibly unique Asian cultural context.

Shortly after reelection to a second term, Bill Clinton visited Thailand for two days in November, during which he reiterated his administration's hesitation to tolerate Burma in ASEAN, driving the wedge deeper in a speech lionizing Thailand and the Philippines for pursuing democracy and conspicuously omitting Malaysia among others. ASEAN's response was a brilliant saving of face: Burma will not be granted early membership but will be one of the three remaining Southeast Asian nations planned to join all at once, on an undisclosed timetable.

Will Burma join ASEAN in 1997? The answer may depend on the United States' follow-up to its 1996 overtures to its regional allies. If the new Clinton administration, with Madeline Albright as Secretary of State, mounts legislative and diplomatic pressure against Burma's military regime, then we may very well see 1997 close with no change in membership status.

NATIONAL POLITICS

Generally, foreign governments measure the stability and progress of Burma's political condition with a finger on the pulse of national politics in Rangoon. Suppressing the heroin trade and developing Burma as an emerging market are important, though corollary, factors. Generally the ongoing civil war situation in contested areas of the country, seems to play a minor role in foreign government policy towards Rangoon. Throughout 1996, most eyes were on the cat and mouse relationship between the State Law and Order Restoration Council and the National League for Democracy.

By midyear the military junta seemed to have had enough with NLD's increasingly overt political activity. One year after the lifting of her house arrest Aung San Suu Kyi was drawing crowds of five to ten thousand citizens, NLD members and military intelligence agents came to her front door every weekend. Sporadic arrests and detainment of NLD members continued throughout the year, some on charges directly related to Suu Kyi, such as distributing videotapes of her talks, and some for other charges like the 21 political prisoners who had their sentences extended for trying to contact Amnesty International. The month of May however was a turning point. As the NLD prepared for its party congress, military intelligence and local police joined hands in a well-planned and orchestrated sweep of arrests throughout the country. In all, approximately 270 NLD members and their associates were detained and interrogated. The NLD congress went on with a fraction of party members participating and most of the no-shows were eventually released.

In June, State media announced a government ban on all unapproved political activity, including the propagation of constitutions other than the one being drafted at the National Convention. The NLD had previously declared its intention to produce a constitution for Burma which would outline a democratic political system. Shortly thereafter regular attendees to Suu Kyi's speeches were arrested and intimidated. Along with tighter traffic and security control on University Avenue, these arrests signalled to the NLD's audience that the weekend addresses had become too political for the military's comfort. Over the next several months the addresses were an on-again off-again affair. November brought the shocking news that Suu Kyi's motorcade had been attacked by a well-organized gang of stick-wielding thugs, widely believed to be in the employ of the military. A dark public relations stunt, the attack was meant both to frighten NLD and frighten off its supporters. Regardless, in December student protesters have

once again taken to the streets of Rangoon.

A vivid memory of the turmoil and violence of 1988 still looms in many people's minds, especially those Burmese citizens who lived through it all eight years ago and are still in Burma's cities. Any time a crowd gathers and especially when a few protestors make the decision to take their opposition to the streets the haunting question arises, will we see another 1988? Will 1997 bring another urban explosion? It very well could, but everyone should hope that it doesn't, for the loss of life, the suffering and trauma of the so-called "8-8-88" generation have been immense, with relatively little to show for it. Nevertheless, the choice about whether civil disobedience becomes violent has never been in the hands of the protesters, but up to the military, which must choose a course of action when confronted with demonstrating masses. Suu Kyi herself has been immortalized on film for the one or two occasions when her presence of mind and strong determination forced soldiers to step out of her way; there is little chance that even she could repeat that feat today. Demonstrations will come and go, and unfortunately so will massacres and excessive use of force. Perhaps the political progress of a nation towards peace and justice can not be measured by when and how the people take to the streets, but by how severely the government reacts.

WAR AND PEACE

1996 exhibited clearly the dark and difficult side of understanding civil war in Burma. Khun Sa, variously described as "drug-warlord" and Shan freedom fighter, is perhaps most accurately given the title of one of the richest businessmen in Asia. This epithet goes much further in explaining the choreographed surrender of his Mùang Tai Army than either of the others. Few people doubt that his quick shuffle-step back to the legal fold in January was a shrewd business move more than anything else. Although earlier reports declared that he would be tried under Burmese law, there is no evidence that his "surrender" has compromised the freedom or luxury to which he has become accustomed.

Similarly; the New Mon State Party, wallowing in the aftermath of its 1995 cease-fire agreement, has witnessed a noted departure of some of its former statesman to the brave new markets of modern Burma. All but shut off from traditional supply and escape routes in Thailand, the Mon people are subject to continued economic and military repression. As, at the time of writing, the Karen National Union ponders its future amid cease fire negotiations and premonitions of more fighting to come, the opportunity arises to point out the changing face of civil warfare in Burma. To the extent that they were ever ideological or political struggles, the armed conflicts in Burma are more quickly mutating into costs and benefits in international business equations. 1996 revealed that a road and second gas pipeline are on the drawing board to join the original pipeline being built through Tenasserim Division. The local Mon, Karen and Tavoyan populations will face harassment and dislocation not because of their race or views on cultural autonomy, but because they are simply in the way of someone's potential profits. The business partners in these projects have repeatedly offered to "buy" security from the local insurgents, yet have been unsuccessful.

1997 may bring the next step where the developers quit messing around with the honey pot and pick up the vinegar. Will Thailand cut the supply and transportation routes between Tenasserim and Kanchanaburi Province in an effort to squeeze the armed opposition into submission? Similarly, the low-level black market trade between Burma and Thailand that has long sustained both mutual profits and benign tolerance may be replaced by more ambitious economic development plans that neither require rebel participation nor profit from military lenience

CONCLUSIONS

Like many years before it, 1996 brought none of the anticipated watershed events which one comes to expect from Burma's political turmoil. There was no devastating offensive wiping out the armed opposition. Aung San Suu Kyi is alive and well plying a thin grey line between too much and too little opposition to a very difficult opponent. Neither ASEAN nor any powerful foreign governments have acted decisively on Burma to say nothing of the UN. Upon closer scrutiny however, one sees that while no major offensive was launched, skirmishes, increased human rights abuse and military repression have crept into more people's lives. While the NLD and other urban activists continue their struggle, they have yet to bridge the ethnic and geographic gaps that divide Burma into a thousand separate struggles. While the UN's frozen expression cracked neither in one direction nor the other, one sees that corporations and diplomats from member states continue to take advantage of Burma's plight. If there is one lesson from 1996 to carry into the new year it is this: war, peace, justice and oppression live and die a little bit at a time. There are no watersheds, no quick fixes nor disasters from out of the blue. There are no revolutions and no beginnings or end to the struggle for peace. The quest for human dignity and security of person, family and nation must be pursued in steps too small to mark on a calendar and too broad to be measured in years.

SURRENDER IS OUT OF THE QUESTION

Saw Thu War

On November 20, a Karen National Union (KNU) delegation travelled from their jungle-based headquarters in Karen State to Moulmein, a garrison town of the Burmese military's Southeastern Military Command, to engage in the fourth round of cease fire negotiations with Burmese military leaders representing the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Slorc). The KNU represents one of the oldest armed struggles against Burmese military in Burma.

The negotiations, however, ended without any progress and the Karen delegation returned empty handed. The consequences of the failure of these talks is an increased threat for the people in the frontier regions of an all out Burmese military campaign against them.

The twelve member KNU delegation was led by the commander of the Karen National Liberation Army, Gen. Tamalabaw who is one of the senior members of the KNU. On the Slorc's side, Col. Kyaw Thein, director of the Psychological Warfare Department, led the military delegation. The Karen delegation spent three days in Moulmein, but the first two days were spent chit-chatting with the local Burmese military officials and actual dialogue was conducted only on the last day.

The first negotiation between the two parties was held in late December in 1994. It failed to reach an agreement, and the next two meetings also ended in a deadlock. Despite these continued failures, the Central Committee of the KNU decided to attend this fourth round of talks in the hopes that at least some small progress could finally be made. According to an unofficial Karen source, progress in the negotiations was hindered to several Slorc demands. One is the persistent Slorc demand that the KNU must totally denounce its armed struggle. The second, and related, Slorc demand is that the KNU return to the "legal fold." For the KNU, both demands imply a surrender which is absolutely unacceptable under the party's policy that: "surrender is out of question."

During the meeting, Col. Kyaw Thein said that Slorc will continue further negotiations for a cease fire only if the KNU accepts both these demands unconditionally. The KNU delegation responded that, as the demands contradict party policy, the delegation had no authority to accept the conditions. All party policy changes of the KNU must be decided by the Central Committee. Slorc eventually agreed to allow the delegation to go back and discuss the demands with the Central Committee. Immediately after the meeting, the KNU delegation left from Moulmein. Currently the KNU is preparing for its Central Committee meeting to discuss the matter.

In the meantime, Slorc has been mobilizing its troops in two major front line areas on the Thailand-Burma border. The KNU reported that Burmese military infantry units are moving around its headquarters area. The Burmese military probably believes that their occupation of the KNU headquarters will demoralize Karen guerrillas. In another frontline area about three hundred kilometers south of the KNU headquarters, Slorc has already positioned more than four thousand soldiers. The KNU's presence and movement in this area was a major threat to the joint-venture gas pipeline project between TOTAL, a French oil company and Slorc. Unocal, an American oil company, is also a share holder in the project. TOTAL plans to sell natural gas from its wells in the Martarban Gulf of Burma to Thailand. The project's potential earnings of huge sums of foreign currency for military expenditures is a major attraction for the Slorc. The project is one of the primary sources of the finances needed to increase its armed forces from 300,000 to 500,000. According to the KNU, Slorc has already relocated more than fourteen civilian villages around the gas pipeline area for the security of the project. TOTAL denies that there are any hu-

For the ethnic nationalities of Burma, the war will only end when a true peace with justice is finally achieved.

photo by Nic Dunlop

man rights abuses along the gas pipeline route, but the KNU asserts that even villages as far as fifty kilometers away from the project, have been relocated for the security of the project.

A second large construction project, about fifty kilometers south of TOTAL's gas pipeline project, is also threatening security and peace in the region. The Thai-Italian Co. is planing to build a sea port in Tavoy, a costal town of Burma, and a highway road from Kanchanaburi in Thailand to Tavoy. Trade and tourism are Thailand's major interests in this project. Slorc expects to gain large financial benefits from the project, but the road needs to go through one of the KNU's well defended areas. Karen guerrillas expect that Slorc will also launch another offensive through the proposed road construction area in order to guarantee security for its construction. Recently, Slorc transferred its 44th Light Infantry Division into the area.

The KNU is also facing political pressure from the United States and Thailand. On November 1, the secretary of the political section of the US embassy in Bangkok, called two KNU officials for discussions. David Taw, one of the officials said that during the hour-long discussion, the secretary warned the two Karen that the KNU should avoid any activities against the gas pipeline construction. He also suggested that US humanitarian aid being channelled through various NGOs to Karen refugees on the Thai-Burma border could be cut if the KNU failed to follow the warning. Any such actions by the KNU, he said, would be considered as terrorist activities. The secretary confirmed that the message was passed to him from Washington D.C.

Pressure from Thailand also comes in the form of political pressure. Food and medical supplies for the Karen comes through Thai territory. During a recent discussion in the jungle headquarters of KNU's Brigade 4, Thailand asked the KNU to guarantee safety for the road construction project. Should the KNU refuse this request, they could face the problem of having the Thai/Burma border sealed off and thus lose access to the food and medicines they sorely need.

A Karen official said in a recent interview that the current situation is one of the toughest in the history of their five-decade long struggle. The KNU is deeply concerned about the increasing number of internally displaced persons in its territory and shortages of food and medicine for the people. Cholera is a current threat for the local Karen populations, and several deaths have already been reported from villages which have no medical supplies to fight the disease.

An end to the present blood shed in the Karen State depends, to a very large degree, on the results of the current cease fire negotiations. SLORC's inflexible position continues to be a major barrier for progress in these negotiations. Income from foreign investments is a major funding source for SLORC's military build up and its power, and these further inhibit successful cease fire negotiations. International economic sanctions would help balance power between the KNU and Slorc, and consequently, there is hope to reach a fair outcome from the negotiations. As long as a power imbalance remains, there is no hope for a positive result from any negotiations. As SLORC's power also partly depends on international recognition of its government status, diplomatic pressure on Slorc to be more flexible in the current negotiations will also be a vital factor. Both actions need to be done before the negotiations totally collapse.

On Tuesday, December 17th, the Boulder City [Colorado, USA] Council passed a Selective Purchasing Ordinance which prohibits the City from doing business with companies having direct investment and/or employees in Burma. The measure, first introduced on November 12, 1996, was passed 'by emergency'.

Councilwoman B.J. Miller told the Council that there are times when they can make a difference, and this is one of those times. In support of the Ordinance, Councilwoman Allyn Feinberg said, "doing something that is the right thing to do is never bad".

Deputy Mayor Spense Havlick, who first requested the Ordinance be prepared by staff, said, "The Council has received an unprecedented amount of mail on the issue from all corners of our community; virtually all of it supporting the measure".

Boulder, a city of some 91,000 citizens, is the home of the University of Colorado. Boulder's annual budget is approximately US$170 million dollars and the restrictions covered by the new ordinance will become effective immediately.

Assistant City Manager Benita Duran told the Council that as an example of a practical implementation of the Ordinance, city employees would be directed not to use a city gas (credit) card at any of the affected service stations. There are four Texaco service stations in Boulder.

Source:

Press Release, 961219

CAN THAILAND LEAD THE REGION TO PEACE?

by N. Chan

ASEAN's seven member states — Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam — are dead set on bringing three more countries into the grouping in order to create a stronger regional economic power. In November they agreed on the admittance of Laos, Cambodia and Burma, but have not yet set a time frame. Burma's future presence in the association continues to pose serious problems, and could become very divisive within the grouping itself unless some courageous and innovative actions are taken soon.

While it is rare for members of ASEAN to defend the human rights record of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Slorc), Burma's military leadership, it refuses to make human rights an issue in determining membership, preferring rather a potential member's acceptance of a free trade area as the criterion for admission. Human rights, they like to say, is an internal affair of Burma and ASEAN countries should not interfere.

Yet it is the terrible human rights record of Burma's ruling military junta which remains a threat to regional security and to ASEAN's global reputation. Any war within the region, even an internal insurgency confined to one country, can pose a serious security threat to the region. Burma's broad insurgency, which has continued uninterrupted for nearly 50 years already, has constantly spilled over into neighboring countries. Over 100,000 refugees are presently seeking safety in Thailand, creating many problems for Thai authorities along the common border. As fighting erupts, armed soldiers from the various antagonist groups sometimes use Thai territory, and it is not uncommon for Thai soldiers responsible for security along the border to lose their lives as Burma's "internal war" enters Thailand. During the past years, Thai villagers have also been killed, and entire villages destroyed by fire, or by stray artillery shells which fall on the Thai side. While the war in Burma, and the gross human rights abuses which result from it, may be considered an internal affair by ASEAN, it fails to be deterred by a small line drawn on a map. Thailand, as well as the other countries bordering Burma, will continue to face border security problems as long as the insurgency is not successfully brought to a just and final solution.

As to ASEAN's global reputation, it is facing more and more criticism from its trading partners in Europe and North America. One criticism is that ASEAN's "Constructive Engagement Policy" towards Burma's military is ignoring a major democratic principle: the sovereignty of the people's voice. The military was soundly defeated in the elections of May, 1990, and yet the military continues to refuse to recognize the winners of the election and to turn political power over to them. Any political cooperation with the military, therefore, is a direct denial of the democratic process, and admitting Burma into ASEAN while Slorc remains in control would tarnish the association's reputation.

A second criticism from the global community is based on charges that the military regime of Burma is propping itself up financially through the extensive drug trade which originates in the country. Burma produces over half of the world's yearly opium crop of approximately 4,000 metric tonnes. The amount of heroin produced from Burma's opium crop amounts to approximately 230 metric tonnes a year; 60% of all the heroin on the world's streets.

US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Gelbard says opium production in Burma has doubled since Slorc took power in 1988. He recently accused the junta of laundering drug money, citing a state press report in August that the head of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) had just purchased part of a Rangoon office building. The UWSA is East Asia's largest heroin-trafficking organization.

If Burma is admitted into ASEAN while these charges continue to be the focus of international attention, ASEAN will certainly be weakened in the eyes of the world. Slorc has denied all charges to being involved in drug production or dealing.

So, what alternative does ASEAN, and perhaps more importantly Thailand, have in regards to Burma? The answer to these questions may actually be quite simple. As long as the war continues to rage in Burma, and as long as the Burmese people themselves are not allowed to participate freely in the development of a truly democratic process for their country, regional security will remain threatened and global criticism of ASEAN's partnership with Slorc will increase. Thus Thailand must play the role of peace maker in Burma, for it is through a truly peaceful solution to Burma's conflict that stability can be gained, not only for Burma, but for the region.

Peace making in Burma will require dialogue between three groups — the Burmese military, the ethnic nationalities, and the democratic forces — in a neutral setting where mutually beneficial compromises can be worked out. In recent months the ethnic nationalities and the democratic forces have repeatedly called for such dialogue, but the Burmese military, which is still convinced that it must eliminate all opposition rather than work together with it for a true and lasting peace, has yet to respond.

ASEAN can help convince Slorc that such dialogue is essential for the good not only of Burma but also for the en-

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PRESSURE ON UNOCAL MOUNTS

Robert E, Wages, president of the 90,000-member Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union (OCAW), today called on Unocal Corporation to "clean up its dirty international business" and to investigate the allegation that Unocal's major partner in a joint venture in Burma is serving as a conduit for laundering money obtained from the illegal production and sale of heroin.

This week a retired OCAW member and former local union officer filed a shareholders' resolution to be voted on by shareholders at Unocal's 1997 annual meeting, calling for the outside company board members to investigate the drug laundering allegation; determine if company officials had any knowledge of it; and recommend a course of action based on the findings.

The allegation was made public in the December 16, 1996 issue of The Nation, which reported on findings from a four-year investigation by the Geopolitical Drugwatch in Paris that the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), a partner with Unocal in the construction of a natural gas line across the southern peninsula of Burma was the major channel for laundering the revenues of heroin produced and exported by the Burmese Army.

According to the State Department, Burma is currently the largest producer of illegal heroin in the world, and 60 percent of the heroin seized by law enforcement officials in the U.S. comes from Burma.

"If the drug laundering allegation is true, it is very unlikely that this could have occurred without the knowledge of Unocal officials said Wages. "Uncovering the truth may mean that Unocal bears direct responsibility for the rise in heroin use in the U.S.," he added.

He termed the drug laundering allegation "deeply disturbing, which, if substantiated and coming on the heels of widespread condemnation of Unocal's links to the use of child and slave labor in Burma, will expose the crucial connection between the company's dirty deeds in Burma and the destruction of our communities in the U.S."

"It appears that Unocal, by abandoning its U.S. operations to take advantage of low wage and slave labor in Asia, is leaving us with a bitter legacy," said Wages.

"It's ironic," he added, "that in the search for higher profits, Unocal management has placed its shareholders, many of whom arc OCAW members, at great risk since it is clear that the democratic forces in Burma will prevail, and Unocal will eventually be held accountable for crimes against the Burmese people."

Wages said his union is becoming more active in the movement to hold Unocal accountable for it's actions in Burma. "We have a lot at stake in this — our jobs, or communities, and the right of people everywhere to live with fairness, dignity and respect," he said. OCAW currently represents oil workers at Unocal refineries in California and at the Uno-Ven refinery in Lemont, Ill. (near Chicago), owned jointly by Unocal and PDVSA, the government-owned oil company of Venezuela. In November, Unocal announced its intent to sell its West Coast refining, marketing and transportation assets to Tosco Corporation.

Source:

News Release of the Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers Intl. Union, AFL-CIO, 961219

(continued from page 6)

tire region. Thailand, as a neighboring state with Burma, is in the most appropriate position to lead ASEAN in this campaign. Prime Minister Chavalit has good contacts with members of Burma's military elite and can use his good office to convince these military leaders to seek peace through dialogue rather than through continued attempts at military conquest. Burma's membership in ASEAN could be linked to their willingness to demonstrate their commitment to regional peace by sitting down with the ethnic nationalities and the democratic forces for sincere dialogue aimed at bringing about true democracy in the country.

Should PM Chavalit decide to take on this challenge, he might not only succeed in helping bring about an end to one of the world's longest on-going civil wars, but he would also become recognized internationally as a true Asian peace maker and respected regional leader.

Sources:

TN961124, TN961204, BP961221

NEWS ITEMS FOR DECEMBER

Schools remained closed, ASSK remained confined to her house, and residents in a 10-square-km area near Sule Pagoda stayed home fearing that they would not be allowed to return home if they left to go shopping. The annual Rangoon marathon was postponed because the route goes through areas now closed off to the general public. Official newspapers published remarks by Gen. Tin Oo who vowed that the Slorc "will never allow the recurrence of the 1988 disturbances and will annihilate any internal elements who are trying to disrupt the country." TN961213

Burmese journalists working for the foreign media complained to the Slorc that Myo Thant was beaten despite his attempts to identify himself as a journalist covering the student protests in Rangoon. The FCCM strongly condemned the brutal and humiliating acts of the police and has asked the authorities to take appropriate action against the security personnel involved. He was detained for about three hours and had later been admitted to a hospital. BP961205

Tim Oo of the NLD said that 28 NLD members have been arrested in the past 5 days, 13 of them from the NLD youth wing and 1 NLD politician. A Slorc spokesman said that ASSK would remain confined to her home until as long as student unrest continued. In response to a rumor that students might stage a protest in front of the city hall, the Slorc placed 20 truckloads of police at the site. Six of the released NLD members were warned not to talk about their arrests or interrogations or they would be violating the Government Secrets Act. BP961213

Government radio announced that the annual Rangoon marathon would be postponed to an unspecified date as soldiers and riot police remained in patrol across the city. In the restricted zone major markets and shops have been forced to remain closed and households and temples are strongly advised not to allow youths to venture outside after 6 pm. The police maintain a low profile during the day, but patrol the streets at night. BP961213

HIV-positive people risk being executed in Burma where Human rights violations are common and the health care system deteriorating, according to health experts. Recently 2 HIV-positive soldiers were injected with an unknown substance that killed them. In 1992 a group of HIV-positive Burmese women who were deported from Thailand back to Burma were said to have been killed by the military. Many soldiers, far from families, frequently indulge in brothels. It is estimated that 2% of Burmese soldiers have HIV and nationally the WHO estimates there are 400,000 HIV-positive people. Widespread usage of heroin has fuelled the HIV epidemic. A UN survey showed 74% of IV drug users in Rangoon, 84% in Mandalay, and 91% in Myitkyina are HIV-positive. In Rangoon, only 60-65% of blood products are properly screened. TN961214

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