

Burma Issues

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CONTENTS

HUMAN RIGHTS.....2

**HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES
IN THE TOUNGOO DIS-
TRICT**

WOMEN.....3

WOMEN AND EQUALITY

CHILDREN.....5

**WHEN CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS ARE JEOPARD-
IZED, SO IS THE FUTURE
OF THE NATION**

EDITORIAL.....6

SEEING THE NEW LIGHT?

LAND MINES.....7

**A LAND MINE VICTIM -
SOE K. N.'S STORY**

NEWS BRIEFS.....8

WHEN CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ARE JEOPARDIZED



Children remain the most victimized group in civil conflicts. Deprived of a stable home environment, sufficient food, medical care, and often of life itself, children are inheritors of the world we leave them. World participation is required to protect these young lives and help them become the new leaders who can bring peace and justice to our societies.

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

HUMAN RIGHTS

HUMAN RIGHTS - ABUSES IN THE TOUNGOO DISTRICT

by CAC

On February 14th, the Karen National Union (KNU) dispatched a 12 member delegation to conduct another round of talks with Burma's military leaders, with the hope that these negotiations could lead to a resolution of this seemingly endless civil war. While Burma waits to find out whether these talks can lead to meaningful political dialogue, it is apparent that the cost of the conflict continues to rise. The following are excerpted human rights abuse reports collected in the northern Karen State's Toungoo District.

DESTRUCTION OF VILLAGES

In 1995, Bawgali Township had 17 villages destroyed. Local villagers report that Se Hch Deh Village, which was burned by Burma Army Battalion 26, has a long history of suffering through the civil war. During Burma's 1942-5 Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) period, the village was burned by the 3rd Kachin Rifle's Battalion. It was again burned during the notorious Four Cuts Operation period of 1976-81. Palaukmu Village, destroyed on the 28th of February 1995, and Ku Lu Deh village, which crops were burned on October the 19th, 1995, also have long histories, dating back to the World War Two era, of being caught in the middle of conflict.

In the same Township, Ter Aye Kee Village has also had its social and economic life destroyed by war. At the inception of the Four Cuts in 1975, the Burma Army's 30 Battalion burned the village, dispersing the residents, who did not return until 1987, when they rebuilt some of the houses. By 1995, the village had grown to about 34 houses and a primary school, with a population of 184, living on rice, vegetable and coffee cultivation. On the 28th of October 1995, 26 Battalion Commander, Myint Aung, instructed his troops to again burn the village, including the primary school and a Catholic church. The people have again fled into the jungle.

Village elders report that their present condition is the worst ever - the people do not have sufficient clothing and medicine and face starvation. They feel that the future is bleak, especially for the children. Despite a strong desire to return to their ancestral lands and village, they feel that

they can only return when the basic right of land ownership is guaranteed can they live there in peace.

FORCED LABOUR ON THE BAWGALI-BUSAKEE CAR ROAD

Also in 1995, construction commenced on a road project, linking Bawgali and Busakee Townships in Toungoo District. The familiar litany of abuses again appears. Villagers forced to build the road complain that:

- 1. they are forced to work without compensation;
- 2. they must provide their own tools and food;
- 3. workers are used as human minesweepers, when clearing land for the project; and
- 4. local farms and irrigation systems have been destroyed without compensation.

Villagers in the area doubt that the road will have any benefit for them.

There is speculation that it is being built only to facilitate the army's control over the area and its efforts to suppress Karen guerillas in Toungoo.

Against the backdrop of these and other abuses, the ongoing attempts at negotiation between the Burmese Army and the KNU seem tenuous at best. As with other cease fire agreements, brokered in lieu of any meaningful political dialogue, Burma can expect that its military leaders will understand that they have made an agreement only with the armed rebels, not with the Karen people as a whole.

As has been reported from the Mon and Kachin areas, after their respective agreements, forced labour, portering and land confiscation will probably continue.

Source:

Saw M.



No relief in sight.

WOMEN AND EQUALITY

THE REALITY AND THE RHETORIC

by K.R.

In their national report to the UN 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, the SLORC referred (rather too often) to the equality that women enjoy alongside men in Burma - "Women are accorded equal rights with men" we are told, and a glowing picture is presented of women enjoying equal rights to health care, education, participation in the workforce and so on. Indeed the SLORC were so determined to make this point that they sent to Beijing a male-led delegation of SLORC representatives with strict instructions to quash any rumours to the contrary.

Historically, Burmese women have participated socially and politically and have not experienced the extremes of discrimination faced by women of many other nations. In their report to Beijing, the SLORC had to dig deep into that history for their examples to demonstrate this equality.

Since 1962, the role of women in mainstream Burmese society has been gradually eroded. This has occurred for two fundamental reasons. The first is that military dictatorships are not known for their inclusiveness of women or for their promotion of values which most societies, and certainly Burmese society, associate with women - those of nurturing, emotional strength and a sense of care.

The second reason is that in a country ravaged by war, everyone's role changes. Men go off to fight, families may move, lives are disrupted. The consequences of the disruption are enormous for women whose major social role has been to care for children and other family members. In Burma, women have taken on so much more than before and the burden of caring for others is made infinitely more difficult when food is scarce, children are distraught and the women themselves are afraid. For no group is this more true than for women of the rural ethnic

minorities of Burma. Add to the list of burdens the loss of loved ones, forced relocations, forced labour, fear of rape and the possibility of starvation, and you have a stark picture of the lives of many Burmese women. Many women have lived for years in this way as well as struggling to participate in the workforce, often for very long hours in the fields. The sense of equality they share with their menfolk is their fear and their despair which are such personal, immeasurable things in any case.

Where women have exercised their rights and their equality to a greater degree has been within the democratic movement itself. This movement is rightly proud of the women who demonstrated, fought and gave their lives to the struggle for democracy. Women are and certainly were until 1988, well represented within the democratic movement, not the least example being Aung San Suu Kyi. The nature of democracy is more conducive to women's participation than military dictatorships after all.

Even within a movement committed to equality, the experiences of men and women differ greatly. This is all the more true when lives are ripped apart by violent realities. The women of Burma, especially those of the ethnic minorities, are less educated, less healthy, with less access to resources both modern and traditional than in the past, because of the realities which face them after years of fighting for their very survival. They are therefore more vulnerable - physically and emotionally. To acknowledge this vulnerability is more important than quoting nice lines about equality. For these women, where there is equality it is at a philosophical level rather than in reality. The realities for the rural ethnic minority women of Burma make talk of equality nothing more than a dream.

The Burmese Women's Union was formed in January 1995 as a voice for Burmese women in the international

arena. Its aims and objectives are as follows:

- 1. To promote the role of Burmese women in politics.
- 2. To practise women's rights to the standard recognised by the international community and to promote those rights in Burmese society.
- 3. To advance the physical and intellectual capabilities of women so that they can support and assist in the emergence of a modern, advanced, peaceful and democratic Union in Burma.

The organisation is made up of women from all ethnic backgrounds and religions. The dialogue of equality is virtuous but it sometimes means that the specific problems faced by women are not addressed. The Burmese Women's Union acknowledges that in times of conflict, women face their own trials and need a voice to represent them, but also that women are able to play a crucial role in transforming society. What follows is from the statement of the Burmese Women's Union to the Briefing on Burma in New York, December 1995.

"Poverty, unequal access to education, health care and economic opportunities, and inequality in the decision-making process at the political and policy-making level, are some of the many problems and barriers that many women in the world face today. While we join in solidarity with the women from across the world who are fighting for women's rights, the voices and struggles of Burmese women continue to be unheard in the international arena. So this forum is indeed a great occasion, an opportunity for Burmese women to speak out and share with you our concerns and our goals, and to seek your guidance.

At the women's conference in Beijing, the head delegate of SLORC stated in his speech that there was no

WOMEN

discrimination against Burmese women, as they are treated equally to their fellow Burmese men. We agree. The Burmese women are equally subjected to summary executions, torture, arbitrary arrest, forced labour, forced portering, denial of participation in the political process, religious persecution and forced relocation. In addition we, the Burmese women, receive unique treatment from SLORC. We are raped during military offensives and portering, and trafficked into prostitution.

The Burmese Women's Union recognises that the pursuit of equality and freedom for Burmese women is inextricably intertwined with the ongoing struggle for democracy and peace in Burma. Burmese women are at the forefront of this political struggle as eminently illustrated by the leadership and vision of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose courage and unwavering commitment to human rights and non-violence are an inspiration to women throughout the world. As she said in the opening speech to the NGO forum, "It is the women and children who have always suffered most in situations of conflict."

Today, violence against women and girls is pervasive under the command of SLORC. Rape is systematically used during military offensives against ethnic nationalities and democratic forces. Women are also forced to serve as human mine sweepers and to carry arms and ammunition for the army. The military supports and propels the thriving trafficking routes by which girls and women are sold into the brothels of Thailand.

Women also bear the brunt of SLORC's policies of forced relocation, where families are expelled from their homes to satellite towns which lack electricity, clean water and access to transportation. Being the primary caretakers of families, women face great difficulties in meeting the most basic needs for the family. It is the women who have suffered the harshest consequences of social and economic collapse.

In preparation for the 1996 "Visit Myanmar Year", many women, some of whom are pregnant, are among hundreds of thousands of people being forced to work as slave labourers in beautification projects as well as in the construction of railways, roads, bridges and airports.

The rights of Burmese women, at the border areas and inside the country, are being violated. We have to endure harsh conditions and violence. However we are also agents of change and play an important role in building a future democratic Burma. That is why the BMU was founded.

It is our belief that we need to pursue the struggle towards the liberation of our country from SLORC's iron fist and to put in its place a government which is premised on peace, human rights, economic and social justice. We also believe that the struggle for women's empowerment and women's rights is complementary to this struggle.

We urge the international community to call upon SLORC:

* to take immediate steps to comply with the UN Commission on Human Rights' resolution of March 8 1995 and the UN General Assembly's resolution of 2nd December 1994, especially "to put an end to torture, abuse of women and forced labour, to enforced displacements of the population and to enforced disappearances and summary execution" and "to allow all citizens to participate freely in the political process."

We urge the international community to refrain from improving relations with SLORC and:

* to stop foreign investment, and boycott companies which are exploiting this situation.

* under no circumstances should the World bank, International Monetary Fund or Burma's key donors resume bilateral or multilateral economic assistance, including debt relief.

* to boycott the "Visit Myanmar Year 1996" campaign by the SLORC to earn foreign exchange.

We call upon women from all over the world to join us in our struggle to end violence against Burmese girls and women, and to promote social changes in Burma that value human rights and women's rights."

Source:

Burmese Women's Organisation



WOMEN, RAPE AND REFUGEE STATUS

The women in Burma who have been victims of systematic persecution by the ruling military, which has used rape as a weapon of war and fostered the intermarriage of Burmese men with ethnic minority women in pursuit of their policy of Burmanisation of the population, may take heart from the recent UNHCR declaration that women who have 'been raped, suffered sexual violence or fear female circumcision are entitled to refugee status if they leave their country.' UNHCR further stated that such women 'are not a threat - they are themselves threatened - and humanity dictates that they receive protection and refugee status.' The UNHCR wants governments to interpret the 1951 UN Refugee Convention to include sexual violence among the grounds for justifying an applicant's 'well-founded fear of persecution.' UNHCR is presently addressing the question of changes to the interview system and an increased sensitivity on the interviewer's part, to ensure that the women's voices are heard.

Source:

BP 950225

WHEN CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ARE JEOPARDIZED, SO IS THE FUTURE OF THE NATION.

by Sara Brunnkvist (excerpted from a report)

"Little has been written about the situation of children in Burma. Human rights abuse reporting tends to focus on adults rather than children. Even international human rights activists are not particularly sensitized to age-related issues or to the special needs and vulnerabilities of children." With this opening quotation, Sara Brunnkvist's study takes us on an uncomfortable voyage through the often contradicting world of word and reality concerning the plight of the smallest victims of Burma's decades-old civil conflict. The paper investigates, through the collation of already existing material, how the State of Burma is treating its children. No new interviews or recordings were done due to time and language limitations. Rather the paper focuses on the differences between the Child Right's Convention and reality: between what is said by the State Law and Restoration Council (Slorc) and what they are actually doing. The following excerpt is from the final discussion section of the paper. The complete paper is available from Burma Issues.

The UN Child Rights Convention (CRC) states that 'Respect for human rights begins with the way society treats its children.' Burma has done three things to reach the goal of protecting the rights of children: ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1991, made a National Plan of Action (NPA) in 1993 and written the Child Law, also in 1993. Interviews conducted by the Karen Human Rights Group indicate that the reality is very different from the rhetoric.

According to Unicef, children in especially difficult circumstances, under the CRC, refer to those children who are victims of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect and includes

refugee and displaced children, war-affected children, exploited children and ethnic minority children. Unicef Myanmar has its own definition which excludes these categories.

A further problem is the way children's rights are expressed, as Article 6 of the CRC guarantees every child's right to life... and that 'states shall ensure the maximum child survival and development...' and Article 2 entitles the child to 'the highest attainable standard of health...'. These vague formulations permit countries to interpret the CRC in any way it likes and allow SLORC to claim that it already

ensures 'to the maximum child survival and development...' and draft the NPA for health and education, but omit other aspects of children's rights, such as children in detention and children exposed to armed conflict, neither of which are mentioned in the NPA..

A final issue is whether Burma's laws can rectify the children's rights violations that Burma does recognise. The Child Law is not yet consolidated law and has yet to be recognised by SLORC. If the National Assembly ever ratifies a new Constitution, it will be interesting to see if Burma can create a society which will follow its own laws, particularly if the military remains the leading political body.

The present situation in Burma indicates that SLORC is breaking both its commitments in the CRC and in its other proposed laws. The CRC is a vision not yet realised. Several sources [cited at length in the full report] argue that a mentally or physically abused child grows up to be a disabled adult. With 40 years of oppression, what kind of adults does Burma have now? Burma is a badly hurt country and, even if peace came tomorrow, it will take generations to heal the wounds.



SEEING THE NEW LIGHT?

by Emma

For several months now, Emma has been monitoring the Burmese military's daily English-language newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*. All newspapers in Burma are military owned, and thus all news information to the people is carefully controlled. In the following article, Emma reflects on her experience with SLORC-controlled news, and concludes that few people in Burma probably take very seriously the "news" as it is fed to them each day

In *The New Light of Myanmar*, the faces in the pictures are remarkably content. Dinners, hotel openings and pagoda renovations are the main events in the capital. A few rebels are recorded as drifting back to the legal fold, but, as 14 of the 15 armed groups in the country have realised the genuine goodwill of SLORC and already embraced them with open arms, there is not much to report. Peace reigns as never before.

New Light articles have a familiar formula to them and the make-up of the paper is similarly consistent. Pages 1, 5-7, and 12, are always reserved for home news; the rest is straight off the wire, albeit of a strange selection. Stories of rebel cease fires, CIA corruption rings and assassination plots abound—compared to Myanmar, the world must be a turbulent place. Fortunately the home news is always reassuring. The first page frequently hails the achievements of a general, such as an expensive dinner or a horticultural show opening. Recently mass rallies all over the country have hailed the National Convention, notably attended by hundreds of thousands of peaceful Myanmar citizens.

But however one scours the paper for interesting news, one is always disappointed. The only thing usually of note is that slogans were chanted and the mass was thus made accessible to the message.

Occasionally there are articles which tax the imagination. In these, Aung San Suu Kyi, the CIA, Madeleine Albright, the Judsons and various Burma NGOs all make an appearance, but in such strange dress as to be almost unrecognisable. Aung San Suu Kyi, for example, is the Little Girl—or the Western Mum—whose relatives are entrepreneurial colonials given to



The New Light of Myanmar

spreading malicious rumours about problems in Myanmar. If she wasn't causing so much trouble, one article says, she would already have been graced with the presence of Than Shwe. But her wise counselors continue to lead her down the wrong path. Perhaps she is so gullible because her marriage (to the foreigner with the big nose) has caused her veins to fill with alien blood.

Meanwhile, the people of Myanmar are told to beware. The records show that there was and still is a foreign hand behind the unrest and instability this nation has known. Youths must defend against a cultural invasion.

Turn the page from the diatribe against aliens and there will invariably be a panegyric for those generous donors of aid and contributors of currency—foreign of course. So who actually reads this and believes it? Who

does this make sense to? Why do they write it?

I am a foreigner myself and I don't live in the Burma SLORC pretends doesn't exist. But it seems to me SLORC needs to say there is peace—perhaps if they say it enough it will come. Or perhaps, if they say it enough, investors like Total and Unocal will have an excuse for believing it. They certainly need one.

In a country where reality is created by the SLORC, perhaps they feel people need to be told what's what. You should not believe everything you see, but you should believe everything you read. After all, how are you supposed to know what the party line is if no-one tells you? And just reading the propaganda demands a comprehensive understanding of SLORC's world view. It's practice in understanding exactly how SLORC thinks.

(Continued next page)

A LAND MINE VICTIM - Soe K. N.'S STORY

by Alice

'How can I run like before? I have only one leg.'

Soe K. N., aged 10 years, arrived, with all his family - his parents, two brothers and one sister - in one of the border camps on the 12th of February 1996. He was the first child land-mine victim - in that camp - for 1996.

Soe lost his left leg, below the knee, in the first week of January 1996. On a fishing expedition, with his grandfather, to check if there were fish in a local waterway, on the Karen side of the border, he stepped on a landmine set on the walking path. Two weeks earlier, SLORC troops had come into the village and warned the villagers not to go into that area, but did not say why.

He remembers falling down, then going up in the air. His grandfather took him to the village, then straight to Mae Sot hospital. While conscious for much of the journey, he lost consciousness before entry to hospital, where he remained unconscious for three days in the intensive care unit, receiving a blood transfusion, as he had lost so much blood. Part of his leg was still attached and later amputated in hospital. His right leg remains severely scarred and he feels numb from his right knee up to his head, which continually aches. While still in pain, Soe's fever has abated and he is able to receive his painkilling treatment from the camp clinic. The wound remains uninfected.

He has just begun to use his crutches, but cannot go far, as he tires very quickly. As yet, there are no plans to obtain a prosthesis and he may wait until he matures more before getting one. His mother supports him as he walks or carries him on her back.

Due to disruptions within his village, Soe K. N. only completed the second standard at school. He will join the camp school when he is feeling stronger and his head stops aching. The other children in the camp do not tease him for having only one leg, as they understand what has happened.

Just after his release from hospital, Soe K. N. asked his mother if there was anyone else like him? Was there anyone else with only one leg? There was. An older man in that camp had lost a leg when a grenade was thrown into his village across the Karen border. One of the shells 'bumped my leg'. Knowing that there are other people in his situation makes Soe feel better. 'I am not alone'.

He isn't. Camp sources said that there were 3 or 4 boys, in the same camp in 1995, who were victims of landmines. In Burma, forced labourers, chopping wood and bamboo are regular victims of landmines. People in the

camp said that the placement of landmines was another reason they feared to return home.

Soe K. N. said that sometimes he feels 'very cross' because he cannot do the things he used to do. He has retained his sense of humour. Posing for photographs, he was asked to stop smiling and pose for a 'serious' shot. 'How can I stop smiling, with you smiling at me? was the grinning reply.

Source:

Personal Interview, 950212



Soe K. N.

(continued from previous page)

As for the question of who believes it all, perhaps the answer is that no-one does. But just as there is no possibility of dissent in Myanmar, there is no possibility of disbelief: its consequences are fatal. That the New Light threatens annihilation of critics is clear enough.

What is clearer after seeing things in a New Light is that Myanmar is not the

same as Burma. Myanmar is Burma as Slorc would like it to be; almost devoid of life, liberty and healthy political dialogue. It's a formula, not a real country. Unfortunately for tourists, Myanmar doesn't exist yet. The latest reports tells us Slorc soldiers are committing atrocities on the borders and almost all large development projects are being completed with forced labor. Educated professionals are being impoverished by skyrocketing prices and your moneys worth ten

times more on the black market than on Slorc exchange. One should wait until the real Burma is given a new lease of life until buying a ticket to Rangoon. As a favorite New Light of Myanmar saying goes, a pleasant home draws guests. Making ones home pleasant is the first task to be done.

NEWS BRIEFS

NEWS BRIEFS FOR FEBRUARY

The SLORC want Aung San Suu Kyi to step down as leader of the National League for Democracy, as they say she has become dictatorial! An item in the New Light of Myanmar suggests that the NLD should consider a future without her since she is popular rather than politically capable. The SLORC are still smarting from the NLD boycott of the Convention for a New Constitution which the NLD declared was undemocratic.

Three Thai fishermen have been jailed following a court case in Rangoon which was closely followed by Burmese government and media representatives. The fishermen were jailed for their part in the murder of Burmese crewmen on board a Thai fishing vessel owned by Narong Canning Company last August. Their detention is seen as a gesture on Thailand's part towards improving

Thai/Burmese relations which soured markedly after the incident and resulted in the closure of the border at Victoria Point.

The US is expressing disappointment that the SLORC will not allow Khun Sa to be extradited to face drug charges, following his surrender. The SLORC claim that the extradition treaty between Burma and the US lapsed some time ago but the US say that the SLORC simply don't want Khun Sa to reveal the part that the junta plays in the trafficking of narcotics out of Burma.

Border tensions continue to pose a problem. DKBA forces seeking out KNU members, have attacked Thai villages and refugee camps. This may be a ploy to make Thailand even less disposed to caring for its refugees and more likely to look at closing some of the camps.

Those MTA (Mong Tai Army) troops who have not surrendered with Khun Sa (estimated at around 800) are seeking to team up with the Shan SSNA to create a larger group to fight the SLORC.

Thai security has been tightened in northern border areas following the DKBA attacks. Troops have been sent to the Doi Lang area where Burmese army troops occupy areas previously held by the MTA. General Chavalit (Thailand) insists that the increased troop activity is not intended as a challenge to Burma.



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