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WORKING FOR THE MAN...

Labour, like all things which are purchased and sold and which may be increased or diminished in quantity, has its natural and its market price. The natural price of labour depends on the price of the food, necessaries and conveniences required for the support of the labourer and his family.

David Ricardo, **The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation**

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

USING FISH OIL TO FRY FISH

Compiled by N. Chan

Since the popular uprising in 1988, the Burmese military has been pushing hard to modernize and to expand its strength to 500,000 soldiers. Reports suggest that, in order to reach this strength, the military is recruiting a growing number of young, poor and poorly educated men and sending them to the frontline with very little training or preparation.

The success of this strategy relies on the military's ability to maintain a very large pool of people with little or no chance for paying jobs and no other potential source of income. Desperately in need of money for survival, these young men often carry out duties, not because they respect and support the military, but because they fear losing the only paying job available to them.

Win Zaw, an 18-year-old Burmese soldier from Mandalay, places the situation in a fairly clear context. "As the economic situation in Burma continued to deteriorate, my high school education came to an abrupt end. My family's economic situation was extremely serious and I feared that my younger siblings would also have to drop out of school because of the lack of money. The rumour around our community was that if we joined the military we would receive our food rations, a place to live, plus 600 kyats per month (approximately US$4.50). I thought that if I could save that 600 kyats each month I could send it to my family and my younger brothers and sisters would be able to continue their schooling. So I joined the army. There were no other jobs to select from. I was 16 at the time."

The promise of even 600 kyats a month is rarely reality. According to some of these young recruits, who have deserted their units and fled to the border areas, officers continually deduct items from their pay, leaving them with barely enough for their own survival at the end of the month. Win Zaw recounts his experience while serving with the Burmese military in Chin State. "Every month the officers would deduct 1 kyat as a donation of some kind, 5 kyats for the Buddhist religious fund, 100 kyats for a savings program, 10 kyats for social welfare, and 40 kyats for the Battalion Commanders birthday gift. With the remainder of the money, we had to purchase our own uniforms. We would have to save for three months to purchase either a shirt or a pair of pants. Because of living in the jungle, our shirts and pants would usually only last about 3 months... we never had anything left to send home to our families."

The military provides alternatives for the young soldiers to earn extra cash. Recruits sent to Chin State are generally young and unmarried. According Win Zaw, the soldiers are urged to marry young Chin women (most of whom are Christian) and convert them to Buddhism. If they are successful in this, they can receive promotions and other privileges. If they fail in this task, and themselves convert to Christianity, they would be given an unlimited prison sentence. Another young defector, Kyaw Han, confirms this and says that this policy is an attempt by the military to Burmanize and assimilate the Chin ethnic group.

Other recent defectors verify other kinds of military abuses which villagers have commonly claimed the military regularly carries out against them. San Lin, a 22 year-old soldier described how civilians were always taken along with military columns as porters and as human shields. "Whenever we went on operations, each soldier took one civilian as a porter. As we walked, our column would consist of one soldier, one porter, one soldier, one porter, and so on. Then, if the insurgents were to attack, the porters would also be killed."

Military units rarely worry about receiving supplies from the rear. Food is taken directly from the people and young recruits are often encouraged to take whatever they want from the villagers. When officers order the recruits to torture and beat the villagers, the recruits obey out of fear of their superiors. "For example, when our platoon was in the Hai Mual village, one of the forced laborers was sick. My platoon commander ordered me to beat him up. I hit him four times on his chest with my gun. He no longer had the strength to stand up by himself. I still feel terrible about hitting him like that, but in the army an order is an order and we have to obey." (Win Zaw)

A military regime, such as the one in Burma, depends to a large extent for its survival on being able to prevent the poorest people within its control (usually the majority) from uniting. One way to do this is to create an economic crisis, so the poor end up joining the very military system which is harassing and oppressing their families and communities. Through such a system the military leaders can sit back and watch the oppressed abuse each other. The Burmese call this "Using fish oil to fry fish."

Military life is extremely difficult for these new recruits. It is only out of serious necessity that they will risk this kind of life for a meagre 600 kyats per month. If the military were to release its hold over the economy of the country and allow some of the profits gained from foreign investments to trickle down to the poor, they would not be able to recruit the numbers they need to reach their target.

Source:

Chin National Front

FORCED RELOCATION IN KYAUK KYI TOWNSHIP

by CAC

Over the past few years, Burma Issues has periodically reported on the human rights and civil war situation in Pegu Division's Kyauk Kyi (Karen: Ler Doh) Township. "Operation Dragon King" (1993) detailed the systematic use of intimidation, torture and execution by the Burmese army as a strategy against civilian populations in 'brown zones', between government and rebel-controlled areas. More recently, three articles in the series "Forced Labor in Kyauk Kyi Township" exposed how the villagers caught in military-controlled areas are subject to continuous economic and political pressures, resulting in the loss of their lands, property, homes and community resources. The latest report from Kyauk Kyi is one farmer's account of his experience with forced relocation by the Burma army in their ongoing efforts to suppress armed rebels in the area.

He speaks:

I am a Karen person of Ler Doh Township, Myet Yeh Village, and am also a farmer. While I was staying there, unimaginable events occurred, starting on April 3, 1991. Between Myet Yeh and Ter Baw villages there was an outbreak of fighting between KNU and Na Wa Ta. The Na Wa Ta battalion leader named Aung Kyeh beat our villagers, then sent people to live in a place between Ler Doh and Nat Thah Gway, adjacent to Noh Go village. Not only people from my village had to go there, but from ten other villages as well.

The place we were relocated to had no work, so it was very difficult for us to earn a living. For the next two years we had to return periodically to our former village, nine miles away, to work the fields. If Na Wa Ta saw people in the area, they would strip them of possessions or arrest them and make them work as porters. Life was very difficult then.

At the end of two years, permission was given for the people to return home - all except those from our village. We had to spend one year at another location. At the end of that year we were happy to be told by the Na Wa Ta that we could finally go home. But we were only re-established for four months when the KNU came into our village. As a result, the Na Wa Ta instructed us to move again.

For five years, between 1991 and 1996, our villagers were always moving around and struggling to survive. Some of us ate rice soup (made from pounded rice grains) the whole time.

On 6th February 1996, in Ler Doh Township. fighting broke out again at Nat Thah Gway. After the KNU and Na Wa Ta started fighting again, Na Wa Ta gave us five days to move back to our old relocation places. This time ten villages had to move to a place called Yah Myo Aung-- the order came from Infantry Battalion 60 commander Nyee So. From there we are taken as porters or forced to pay porter fees of 3000 kyats.

Now I want to share this information with the world.

Source:

"Information Regarding Kyauk Kyi Township, Pegu Division," 950396.

Villagers from Lar Doh Township relocating their dismantled home

REFUGEES ARRESTED

Eight refugees, 5 men (3 aged 60) and 3 women (one with a 19 month old baby, now being cared for by friends at the camp) were detained by Tak officials, with 9 lengths of bamboo with which they intended to use to repair their houses. 7 were charged with illegal entry, sentanced to terms from 6 to 13 months and are now in Mae Sot jail. The 14 year old girl was released, as underage, but was taken by a policewoman to work in the laundry shop. After working there 11 days, she was returned to camp

WORKING FOR THE MAN

by Alice Davies

The Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) recently proposed to create a special economic zone on the Burmese and Cambodian borders. This would concentrate on production for export, be staffed with foreign labour and have no minimum wage requirement. It is expected to address the joint problems of illegal foreign labour and a labour shortage. It should be viewed with apprehension. Thailand has been a signatory to the International Declaration of Human Rights (Dec.) since 1946 and a member state of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) since 1919. As such, it has certain obligations. A member state which has not ratified a convention is considered 'morally bound' by a convention or recommendation, unless it writes to the ILO specifically objecting to the recommendation or convention. Whether Thailand is de facto or de jure bound by the relevant conventions and recommendations, migrants workers - legal or illegal - face difficulties, as they rarely fall within the parameters of the relevant international law (including, inter alia, Rec.s 86,100 and 151 and Conventions 95,97,131 and 143) and must rely on the open statements in Arts.6, 7 and 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This is because most of the law relates to state sponsored migration for employment or to migrants lawfully within the state (Rec.s 100 and 151). UNHCR refugees may qualify, but Thailand recognises all other displaced people as illegal immigrants.

The Declaration specifies that everyone is entitled to work, to just and favourable conditions of work and equal pay for equal work (Art.23 Dec. and Art.7, ICESCR, reiterated in Conv.131 and 95) and that all persons are entitled without discrimination to the protection of the law (Art. 26, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights _ ICCPR). Art.5 (ICESCR) particularly excludes the right of any State, group or person to derogate from these rights by engaging in any activity or performing any act aimed at the destruction of any of these rights and freedoms, or even pretending that the Covenant only recognises these rights to a lesser extent.

The Thai government has rejected policy guidelines, proposed by its own Labour and Social Welfare Departments that a minimum wage for foreign workers be implemented. Migrant workers presently receive 30-50% of local labour wages.

These proposals are further formalising the present situation of immigrant labourers (mostly illegal Burmese), who may be registered in Thailand. They may be provided with Thai identification cards, if guaranteed by their employers,and obtain a work permit.

Particularly pertinent is the comment by the FTI President that the cost of Thai labour is increasing by about 10% per year. Thai labour is finally finding its voice and themselves demanding a liveable minimum wage, or migrating to richer pastures. Thai workers have rarely had labour law upheld in their favour and there appears to be even less hope for immigrant workers.

The annual increase in the minimum wage, now set at 145 baht, is reportedly the most frequently cited cause for a decline in Thailand's attractiveness as a low-cost, labour-intensive production centre

Volvo has said that Asia will get the lion's share of the $1billion the company wishes to invest outside the OECD. Thailand must feel threatened by reports that 'European firms, which missed the boat in East and Southeast Asia, by failing to invest .. will not make the same mistake in South Asia... the fastest growing sector over the next decade will be consumer products and services' - Thailand's traditional base. Other Asian nations, including South Korea, are looking at formalising their foreign labour laws to overcome increasing wage costs and a shortage of cheap labour, as their own citizens seek fortune overseas.

One problem illegal migrant workers face is that Convention No.143, while considering that the ILO is to protect the interests of workers employed in countries other than their own and that 'labour is not a commodity', is purportedly to overcome underdevelopment and structural and chronic unemployment. All States, for which it is in force (including Thailand, which has ratified it), are required to respect the basic human rights of all migrant workers. The State must declare and pursue a policy designed to promote and guarantee equality of treatment in respect of employment, occupation, trade union and cultural rights and individual and collective freedoms. Restricted access to employment is permitted in the interests of the State. In the present case, Thais must first refuse the employment before it can be offered to immigrants. If it is a situation where Thai labour is 'pricing itself out of a job', the Burmese may not be afforded the protection this convention should offer.

A further incentive for companies (wanting alternatives to Bangkok's expensive land) to take advantage of the cheap labour at the borders is that the cost of establishing factories is less expensive and the government is offering incentives to decentralise.

The Deputy Foreign Minister has suggested joint Burma-Thai activities and border committees. PM Barnharn was given a red carpet welcome in Burma on his recent visit, so the leaders' relationships appear very positive. The possibility of animosity between the neighbouring countries at grassroots levels is very real.

(continued next page)

RECENT FOREIGN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN BURMA

compiled by KR

Branches of Asia Wealth Bank, Arab Bangladesh Bank, Dutch ING Bank, Banque Nationale de Paris and representative offices of Societe Generale Bank and Yasuda Fire and Marine Insurance company opened. Seminar on capital market investment organised by Daiwa. Brooker Group Business and Investment Networking Mission was led by AD Scott Rosenberg of Bangkok.

Mining

Glencore Far East had discussions with the Deputy PM and Chiyoda Corp. about laying oil pipelines around Mandalay.

Infrastructure.

Total has signed a final export agreement with PTT (Th)

Hlanga natural gas power station opens in readiness for Visit Myanmar Year. Cost K430M.

Sumcheong Exploration Ltd (SI) has signed a joint exploration agreement and Marubeni (JA)an irrigation joint venture for heavy machinery.

Six Chinese-built ferries have arrived in Rangoon from Yunnan Machinery Import and Export Company.

Ericsson Australia Pty Ltd is constructing 4 new radio stations and has signed a contract to install 4000 cellular 'phones in Rangoon.

Tourism

Asian PGA Myanmar Golf Championship was broadcast on Star TV.

Sedona Hotel (Straits Steamships) opened.

Sakura Tower Investment Holdings Pty Ltd (JA) will upgrade Pagan Hotels.

Belgium's ambassador discussed aviation with the Minister for Transport.

Thai Airlines has signed an MOU to increase its air traffic into Rangoon from 7 flights to 10 per week.

Singapore has signed a civil aviation agreement with Burma.

The Oriental Hotel plans extensive expansion into Burma, including massive hotel development in Pagan.

The Northern Telecom (CA) is using an Israeli company as a commercial for its Burma investments sector.

Guinness Stout is being introduced through Inter-trade (SI)and Tet Nay (BU)

Win Star Optical has opened a salesroom and Toyota a showroom and maintenance work shop in Rangoon.

TMW and Sony Int Ltd (SI) had a products seminar.

Charoen Pokphand (TH) is establishing itself in Burma and is distributing a new hybrid maize seed

Silver Light Equipment (TH) opens an office in Rangoon.

Advance Paint and Chemicals (TH) is expanding into Burma.

Columbia (US) Sportswear have entered into a deal with the SLORC, where profits from the manufacture of their clothing is diverted to weapons purchases.

Sources:

New Light of Myanmar 960121, 960115,960, 960123,960112,960125, 951204,951115.

Bangkok Post:960305,960227, 960220, 960103, 960218

The Nation 960219, 960122

Burmanet 960222, 960204, 960207

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Those Thais who are willing or forced to labour may find themselves unemployed, as unscrupulous employers take advantage of the cheap labour, or use them as 'scab' labour to break strikes. The whole situation is not aided by reference in local newspapers to the Burmese being spies, security threats to the nation and carrying disease. The average Thai person, remembering the deaths of their countrymen on the border and at sea, cannot have an easy mind. The decision reflects a global trend, as the recent G7 nations jobs summit's final statement is reported to not set minimum standards for work conditions, job security and social welfare. In many of the developing nations, there is a cheap labour shortage, while many developed nations have high unemployment. The present trend of the globalisation of business and the integration of economies, which permits companies to increase their mobility and therefore bargaining positions vis a vis governments and workers, with the threat of relocation, must be addressed.

Desperation on both sides is evident: in the stories of horror trips across the border and huge fees extorted to supply the demand for cheap labour in a global market.

Sources:

BP 950827, 951124, 960323, 960331, 960403, 960404

TN 960401, 960402, 960403

ILO Conventions and Recommendations/ Interview

ALL THE LOVELY INNOCENTS

by Alice Davies

The world is right to mourn the apparently random massacre of 16 Scottish school children and their teacher by a local man wielding four handguns. What relevance does this inexplicable tragedy half way across the globe have to Burma?' Answer: Apparently nothing. It is the reactions to both tragedies that warrant further investigation.

The world is properly mourning the deaths of these poor children and offering support and sympathy to their grieving families. The contrast with the world's screaming silence on the situation in Burma is frightening.

In Burma, 39% of children never start school and only 27% complete the compulsory five year primary cycle. These are the lucky ones - those who survive to attend school. About 15% of children born alive do not reach 5 years of age. Of these, 23.46% are of low birth weight, with the concomitant development and learning problems as they grow. The infant mortality rate is 47% (1990). These statistics are for the urban areas - very few are available for rural areas. With only 39% of rural households having access to safe drinking water and 30,000 diarrhea deaths/year among young children, the true numbers are open to speculation.

UNICEF is providing assistance for the primary education program ($7.3 million between 1991-5), for rural water supply ($9.8 million for 1991-5) and the National Plan for Immunisation ($10 million for 1991-5) to this least developed country, which, in 1995, reportedly purchased some $3.2 billion of military equipment.

The Headmaster of the Scottish school said that 'evil visited us yesterday and why? We will probably never know. All that remains is the terrible memories that we have lost 16 lovely, innocent children.'

The military junta in Burma has refused to transfer power to the democratically elected government. They pursue, particularly against the minority peoples, systematic policies of starvation, rape, random killing and beating of civilians: activities for which they have been repeatedly condemned by the United Nations.

The world's business community reacts by defying the elected leader and increasing investment. The infrastructure necessary for the development of the general population is being developed to implement these policies.

Uninformed visitors will take advantage of the 'Visit Myanmar Year' easy visas, gaze in wonder at the beauty of Pagan and Mandalay and remain unaware of the forced labour and relocated villages which contributed to the vista.

In Scotland, questions are already being asked about where this man obtained the guns and how was he classified as fit to hold a firearms license? No questions with SLORC: their weapons are from China - and were used to such good effect, as seen by their offensive against the Karenni.

The people of Dunblane were able to attend church services, the churches decorated by tributes and bouquets from people around the world who shared the families' terrible sorrow and wanted to show support. The Prime Minister and Opposition leader made pilgrimages to the town, Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, and Princess Anne visited and there was a national moment of silence across the country, in sports stadiums, churches, supermarkets and the BBC.

The surviving children and the grieving parents of victims will properly receive all the necessary counselling and community support to help them come to terms with the horror. In Burma, the communities are fragmented and those that remain intact live in the constant fear that they might be next. There is no counselling for survivors provided by the state and they can look for little community support. How can a fragmented group of people be called a community and how can traumatised adults provide the necessary support for their children?

What is happening in Burma? The deaths of their children are mourned by the world by national leaders paying visits to boost ties, by trade delegations and by increased investment, which is not promoting their health and livelihood, but strengthening the grip of the present regime. Britain, former coloniser, is now one of the largest investors.

The world should support the Scottish Headmaster's efforts, as he plans a normal school day when the school reopens, with the parents and school co-operating.

What is 'normal' for Burma's children? High infant mortality rate, forced relocation and destruction of their homes and food supplies, forced labour when their parents are unable to comply with SLORC orders to supply labourers, the anal rape of an 11 year old boy by a soldier, or a baby being grazed by bullets or thrown into an open fire when soldiers broke into his parent's home?

The Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances Program is constrained by 'very limited official budgetary allocations', lack of staff and institutional resources and low public awareness of children's rights.

As one Scottish father said, 'It's a crazy world.'

Sources:

UNICEF,

BP 960316, 960317

TN 960316, 960317

BOYCOTTS: PEOPLE POWER AT WORK

by K.R.

When the Burmese people ask us not to travel to or invest in Burma and to not give credence to the SLORC, it is frustrating and disappointing to have these requests openly flouted. The list of companies willing to invest in Burma grows by the month and many nations, notably those in ASEAN, pursue constructive engagement policies which ensure that Burma can continue to trade with its neighbours. Too often, self-interest dominates in dealings with the SLORC.

Those administrations and companies which choose other priorities are inspirational. Recent political tactics by Burmese activists in the US are examples of what committed individuals and groups can achieve: as shareholders of companies, lobbyists and representatives.

Some US companies have withdrawn from Burma: a result of boycotts and publicity by Burmese activists.Most of these are clothing manufacturers, taking advantage of cheap manufacturing costs, in the form of cheap labour and few labour rights, and generous taxation arrangements. They should be permitted to reap some benefit from their actions.

Levi Strauss was one such company. It withdrew its Burmese operations in 1992, with management informing shareholders that, as the SLORC owned most of the factories they purchased from, they would cease operations there. Liz Claiborne followed in 1994, citing concern that continuing their operations within Burma would show tacit approval of the SLORC.

Eddie Bauers Stores (Spiegel) was targeted by Burmese activists with boycotts and publicity. The company responded to what they described as a growing opposition to trade with Burma - a reaction to outcry, but also an expression of concern that the financial consequences of continuing down this path may be bad for them.

In 1995, Macy's (Federated Department Stores) also withdrew citing corruption and SLORC ownership of factories as reasons.

When boycotts start working, companies are forced to consider wider issues. How does it appear in the long term if they continue to deal with the SLORC? And what kind of mileage can be made by 'doing the right thing'? Recently, the Shell company was forced to back down over the proposed sinking of an oil rig in the North Sea - the result of publicity by Greenpeace and a concerted and disciplined boycott of Shell products in Europe. Not only was Shell losing money, but it stood to lose more in the long term.

In America, companies investing in Burma have a new enemy: the creative use of selective puchasing legislation which gives any administrative body (state government, university board, city council) the power to make decisions about purchasing their needs. In recent years, some administrations have used this legislation to prohibit the purchasing of goods from companies which which operate with or in Burma. Lucrative contracts can be lost or denied. Unocal, PepsiCo and other big American companies are lobbying hard against the use of this legislation because they stand to lose money and such boycotts have their own momentum. Not only do they increase awareness about the issue, encouraging people to avoid those companies, but they also allow companies which do not deal with the SLORC, to gain respect as well as contracts they might not otherwise have been eligible for. PepsiCo has recently lost a multi-million dollar deal with Harvard University through student pressure.

Berkeley City Council has already made use of this law, as have the cities of Madison (WI) and Santa Monica (CA) have also taken advantage of selective purchasing legislation against companies which deal with the SLORC. The cities of Ann Arbor (MI), Bloomington (IN), Cambridge (MA), N.Y. City and Oakland (CA) and the states of Vermont and Massachusetts are also considering the use of this legislation.

These U.S. actions should encourage us. There must be laws which can be utilised by concerned citizens in many western countries. For example,in Australia local council administrations are autonomous in many respects. By lobbying councils, it is possible that people could influence the councils to take similar action to that being undertaken in the U.S.

Results such as those achieved in Berkeley, show that the effort is worthwhile. As the numbers of city councils, state and local administrations that use selective purchasing legislation increase, so too will support for sanctions against Burma at a federal level. The next year could bring both of those things - further use of selective purchasing legislation and approval in the U.S. Congress for sanctions against Burma.

Update on foreign investments this month:

Deithelm Travel has opened new branches in Bagan and Mandalay.

Arrow Garments may take advantage of cheap labour for a factory in Burma.

Siam Steel factory is investigating setting up a steel bar factory in Burma on a 50/50 basis with Burmese private companies.

Hyundai Engineering and Construction Co.Ltd will join the bid for the gas pipeline, running from Yadana and Yeidagon, Burma, to Thailand.

NEWS BRIEFS FOR APRIL

Four NLD members have been sentenced to 7 years in prison for their part in a performance at the home of Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD leader was prevented from attending their trial in Mandalay.

Michael Aris, husband of Aung San Suu Kyi, has again been refused a visa to visit his wife.

Thai Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa visted Burma and China. Border checkpoints at Tachilek and Ranong were opened as a gesture to prepare for his visit. Banharn's visit yielded little in terms of progress in Thai/Burmese relations. Border trade agreements were signed.

Banharn inspected a site in Mandalay for the building of a new airport. The Italian-Thai company (TH) has tendered for the work to build the airport. Banharn approved the project and agreed to a massive loan from the Export/Import bank. The SLORC will stand guarantor for the loan. Banharn's justification for the project is that a new airport will help to boost trade between the two countries.

The SLORC's promise that drug trafficking would diminish as a result of Khun Sa's 'surrender' and the MTA ceasefire, is an empty one. It appears there are now fewer limitations on trafficking,since there is more cooperation, so the trade continues to grow.

SLORC's convention for a new constitution has approved provision for the election within the parliament of three vice presidents, one of whom would be a military representative. The president would be chosen from these three. The rules would prohibit anyone who has not lived in Burma continuously for 20 years, anyone married to a foreigner or with foreign born children from running for election or becoming president

Myanmar Economic Bank and Japan's Daiwa Institute of Research are to set up a joint venture to prepare for a joint stock exchange in Rangoon.

Activists from the Rainforest Action-Network protested in 4US cities and Japan against the Mitsubishi Corporation's logging practices.

The Myanmar Economic Bank and Japan's Daiwa Instsitute of Research are to set up a joint venture to prepare for a joint stock exchange in Rangoon.

Sources:

BP960305,960316,960318,960411, 960407

TN960304,960311,960315,960326

Burmanet 960401

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