

Burma Issues

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CONTENTS

PROPAGANDA.....2

PROPAGANDA AND THE
HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA

CEASEFIRES.....3

TAMING THE ELEPHANT

HUMAN RIGHTS.....4

HUMANITY AT THE
CENTRE

POLITICS.....6

PEACE PATHS

ECONOMICS.....7

...AND THE HARVEST
SHALL BE PLENTIFUL?

IN THE NEWS.....8

HUMANITY AT THE CENTRE



It is time that the deciding factor in international politics is no longer diplomacy, sovereignty or economics, but rather humanity: the humanity of the smallest and most powerless in our societies.

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

PROPAGANDA

PROPAGANDA AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA

by CAC

Our previous issue offered a brief glimpse into recent Burmese government propaganda tactics (People's Desire, June 1996). Studying state propaganda should be part of any movement to build a more just society and should receive more careful attention than has been attempted thus far. By publicising their efforts to manipulate and program the masses, repressive institutions also reveal their own fears and weaknesses, signalling opportunities for effective counter-actions.

What exactly is propaganda and why is it dangerous to begin with? Is all information from the state propaganda? Conversely, can propaganda also originate with non-government entities?

One possible working definition for propaganda is *information communicating only those words, symbols and images which reinforce one's own agenda to the exclusion of a critical or objective perspective*. Propaganda can be true or false, factual or opinionated, constructive or divisive. The key is not objectivity or truth in the information, but the process and intention behind it. This subtle obfuscation is more sophisticated than the simple substitution of falsehood for truth. When state TV shows Khin Nyunt visiting a temple or Than Shwe opening a new agricultural machinery co-operative, it is not the falsehood which viewers detest, but the impact of what is left unsaid.

Because information plays such a powerful role in the opposition movement, the potential also exists to create propaganda rather than useful, critical information. There is a great temptation to cast shadows on all Burma's military rulers in Rangoon and neglect to see any positive light or recognise a wider distribution of responsibility for social injustice. These acts of omission may, in the long run, be just as detrimental to the people's strug-

gle as state propaganda because they can obscure realities which are just as concrete, and often larger, than SLORC itself.

Racism is a good example. Very few human rights or political analysis reports give serious treatment to the role of racial, religious and linguistic discrimination inside Burma. Yet, these forces are absolutely central to the conflicts in Burma today. Even advocates of minority rights tend to focus narrowly on the present moment in history, blaming 'SLORC' for failing to give indigenous groups their rights. Yet, many of these groups have been in social and military conflict with Burman governments for decades and evidence suggests that deep racial chauvinisms have played a part in Burmese history for centuries. Deep racial rifts still exist among opposition groups, surely a major factor in the opposition movement's collective failure to form and present a united front.

Rather than research and expound on these basic social maladies, most commentators look only at their most visible symptoms. This tendency has made human rights abuse information a growth industry. International, regional and local human rights organisations produce volumes of testament to the reality of human rights abuse and even opposition groups have come to recognise the power of such information in supporting an anti-SLORC platform. Yet, little of this material provides any insight into the economic, political and social forces at work behind the scenes of violence and oppression. The result is an absolute wealth of simple human rights abuse information and a nearly absolute dearth of critical analysis and interpretation. This lack of depth admits only the shallowest understanding of where human rights abuse comes from, how it has developed and, most crucially, how it may be stopped. Many observers are quick to answer that abuse comes from SLORC, has developed with military expansion

since 1988 and can only end when SLORC is defeated and removed - one way or another.

This line of reasoning omits much, perhaps to the point of resembling propaganda. What else should be said? Consider how including these fundamental observations might alter the opposition's interpretation of human rights information:

- the denial and abuse of fundamental human rights and freedoms is a structural reality in many aspects of Burmese society and not only the creation of the present military government.

- government repression and communal violence, especially among ethnic groups, have a long history in Burma, dating back to well before the current military leaders were born.

- racial, and to some extent religious, chauvinism is endemic in Burma and is currently encouraged by the state policy of 'Burmanisation', the coerced homogenisation of the country's cultural and religious diversity.

- In light of these observations, meaningful change in Burma's human rights situation must be achieved by addressing these root cultural causes, as well as overt political institutions such as the military and SLORC.

This initial list will hopefully generate new ideas and challenges from the opposition community and may serve to focus our treatment of human rights abuse information, making it more sophisticated and useful for all the peoples of Burma. Without this advancement of our own thought and action, we risk becoming little more than a rival propaganda machine, battling the state on its own terms. Burma is already rich in propaganda: the opposition should offer an intelligent, concerted and critical voice for peace and social transformation.



TAMING THE ELEPHANT

by N. Chan

The indigenous people of Burma are being treated in the same way a wild elephant is treated after being captured by the hunter. At first the hunter keeps the wild elephant without giving it any food or water in order to make it lose its physical and moral strength. Only when the wild elephant is near to dying does the hunter give it a little food and water. The amount of food and water is increased little by little depending on the obedience of the wild elephant to the hunter's commands. At last the elephant gives in totally to the hunter and becomes a good and obedient servant with no demands of its own. (adapted from a statement by the Mon National Council, 18th February, 1996)

Since 1989, major efforts have been made by the military regime of Burma to bring armed opposition groups under its control through the signing of cease fires, a process the military refers to as "returning to the legal fold". While many would perhaps like to think that such cease fires are an important first step in moving towards dialogue on the crucial political and ethnic issues which lie at the heart of the 46 year-old conflict, there is no evidence to suggest that any progress has been made towards such talks. Unfortunately the opposite may in fact be the case. The cease fires have not only helped the military become even more solidly entrenched in its power base, but have also further marginalized the struggle for ethnic rights from the eyes and interest of the international community.

Until 1988, two distinct and separate struggles were taking place in Burma. In the urban areas, a civil rights struggle was being waged to push for more democratic space in terms of free press, educational reforms, economic liberalization, the end to a one-party political system, etc. In the distant rural areas, primarily along the borders of the country, a variety of indigenous groups were involved in armed struggle for self-determination and the protection of their cultures and traditions. The military coup of September 1988 drove the urban civil rights struggle into the jungles of Burma's borders where, for the first time, it linked up with those involved in struggle for ethnic rights. The merging, at least partially, of these two struggles created a sudden surge of energy and international awareness. The power needed to dislodge

the military stronghold over the country was rapidly organizing.

International concern and interest in Burma, long dormant, also came alive and for the first time in decades international forums were discussing the human rights, ethnic, and political issues which had created so much pain and suffering for the people of Burma for so many generations.

It was within these realities that the military leaders devised the cease fire strategy as a way of once again splitting apart these two struggles. Their plan was to bring the political struggle back to the urban areas where it was more manageable and where the international community could focus more of its attention. The indigenous struggle, and the important ethnic issues which are in such need of attention, could then be pushed into the background of international interest, giving the military much more freedom to crush and eradicate this movement through overt military force.

Since the Wa insurgency signed a cease fire in 1989, some 14 other ethnic insurgent groups have entered cease fires with the military. In no case was the cease fire a part of a process to deal with the political and ethnic issues. Rather the military adopted a process similar to that of taming a wild elephant: attack and harass the civilian populations to the point that they can no longer survive. When they have been pushed beyond their ability to endure, offer an end to the torture along with possible economic development in return for a cease fire.

Any negotiations carried out with the sincere desire to bring about a just solution can only be done when all sides involved in the discussion can sit down as equals, and can be confident that their concerns will be placed on the table and dealt with openly and honestly. When one side holds all of the advantage, no peace process, and indeed no justice, is possible.

Cease fire negotiations in Burma which have the potential of moving towards the settlement of political and ethnic issues is one of the most important items for the international community to help work on. As long as the military feels confident in their grip over the country, they will feel no motivation to seriously listen to the needs of the indigenous people, nor to work together with them to find a way all can live together peacefully.

In the light of these realities, several important things require immediate attention. First of all we must start seriously seeking more practical and well orchestrated strategies which can result in the kind of pressure needed to set the scene for effective dialogue. Secondly, the international community must become more aware of the dangers of allowing the ethnic issues of Burma to become marginalized.

Peace in Burma will not come about by treating the process as though one were training a wild elephant. It will only come when all people truly have the opportunity to air their concerns and have those concerns taken seriously.



HUMAN RIGHTS

HUMANITY AT THE CENTRE

by N. Chan

The world community moves, but it does so at an agonizingly slow pace. It is true that the larger an institution becomes, the more processes that institution will need to come to any conclusions or make any decisions. This is especially evident in national level institutions as well as global institutions such as the United Nations. While the need for all of this process is probably crystal clear to those operating within these institutions, it is a source of untold suffering and despair for those in this world who are powerless or marginalized, and who rely on these institutions to protect them, or at least to bring them some relief.

Slow but Sure?

The United States Senate is presently confronted with a bill which would impose sanctions against the military regime of Burma. The concept behind this bill is that sanctions would put pressure against the military regime in Burma to end its civil war against the people and thus end the vast human rights abuses rampant in that country. If passed in its present form the bill would; 1) prevent any US nationals from making any investments in Burma, 2) prohibit US assistance for Burma, 3) stop any loan or other utilization of funds from financial institutions to Burma, and 4) prevent Burmese nationals who formulate, implement, or benefit from policies which hinder the transition of Burma to a democratic country from entering the US.

A similar bill was introduced last year but it was withdrawn because of inside politics. People in Washington speculate that the present bill (S.1511) may also not pass, mainly because many senators are opposed to unilateral sanctions, perhaps fearing that American business will lose out. Attempts to urge faster and more determined action by the US Senate get the response that, "These things take time. The wheels of congress grind slowly." And in the meantime, how many villages in Burma have been burned? How many people forcibly displaced? How many men, women, and children killed?

In a similar vein the United Nations has, for many years now, treated the military regime of Burma as a pariah. The U.N. Human Rights Commission has yearly condemned the regime for

its terrible abuses against its own people. The General Assembly has also regularly put out strongly worded resolutions calling on the regime to take steps towards democracy, release political prisoners and end indiscriminate abuses against the citizens of the country. Yet the military regime still occupies the Burma seat in the General Assembly despite being ousted from leadership by the Burmese people in free elections in 1990. The U.N., according to one observer, is like a toothless dog. It can bark loudly, but it just can't bite, so the military regime has no fear of and little respect for it.

U.N. people shrug their shoulders and say everything has to be done very carefully. The U.N. can not step on the sovereignty of a member state and so they have no right to expel the military from the seat, or even to take actions greater than putting out a statement or a resolution. The issue, they say, must be taken to the Security Council if any "bite" is to be connected to the "bark", and the permanent members of the Security Council do not want to discuss Burma because of their own political interactions.

But what is the sovereignty of a country? Is it represented by the desires of a small group of people who can control and manipulate because they have the biggest guns? Or is it the voice of the people, expressed at great risk through participation in elections, public protests, or simply cries for help and understanding? If hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of internally displaced persons in Burma cry out to the U.N. for protection, how can the U.N. refuse on the grounds of national sovereignty

just because a few generals, known to be the cause of the suffering, claim to own the throne? Is not the sovereignty of the country expressed rather through the voice of the people?

Humanity as the Priority

Yes, the wheels of international justice creak along at a snails pace, and the reasons for the slow pace is understood only by those who sit within the institutional walls and survive on these bureaucratic systems. But when these systems creak and groan along at the expense of the poor and powerless of our world, then they most urgently need to be changed. Perhaps those sitting in the halls of the US congress, or the European Parliament, or the U.N. Security Council have the time to spend years talking, debating, proposing, and postponing, but time is not a luxury the majority of the people in Burma have. Each day the number of graves in the countryside increases. Each day the lives of children are shattered and their futures denied. Each day families are uprooted, displaced, separated, and destroyed. If the world community can not finally hear their cries, and consider their voices as the national sovereignty of the country, the time will come when these powerless and oppressed gather up their knives and pitch forks and resort to the only option for survival they feel they have left.

It is time that the deciding factor in international politics is no longer diplomacy, sovereignty, or economics, but rather humanity: the humanity of the smallest and most powerless in our societies. The protection of human beings should not be controlled by na-



A 35 year-old Kayah man displays the sores on his wrists and upper arms after being tied up for five days and forced to serve as a porter for the military. What protection does the UN and other international agencies offer these victims of military oppression?

tional boundaries, and especially not by the dictates of a small elite who in no way represent the citizens of a country. The protection of human beings must be controlled by the sincere belief that every human being, no matter what colour, ethnic group, religion, economic class, age, or gender, has an equal right to life, liberty, and happiness. It is the responsibility of all of us, especially of those in decision-making positions, to ensure that those rights are protected.

There are some 98,000 refugees from Burma seeking protection in Thailand from abuse and fear of the Burmese military. Perhaps one and a half million more people have been uprooted from their homes and moved

into strategic hamlets or resettled in new "secure" areas, thus becoming internal refugees. The prisons of Burma are full and new ones are being built. Amnesty International says they have evidence that at least 1,000 of these prisoners are political prisoners, but admits that the number could be much higher.

These numbers are only the tip of the human rights abuse iceberg in Burma today, and unfortunately, the numbers continue to grow. If the halls of international power can not move more quickly and effectively in defence of these poor and powerless, then perhaps they are not designed in such a way that they can truly guarantee peo-

ple's right to life, liberty, and happiness.

When we finally begin placing as much importance on the rights of the poor and powerless of this world as we do on diplomacy and respecting "national sovereignty", then perhaps, just perhaps, human rights will become an important and respectable value in our world.



PEACE PATHS

By N. Chan

During a July 10 panel discussion on the topic "Burma: 1 Year After the Release of Aung San Suu Kyi", academics and activists in Thailand came to the conclusion that pressure against the military leaders of Burma is the only way to help move the country towards change and a chance for peace. They stressed that such pressure needs cooperation between the ASEAN states and countries of Europe and America. However, they stopped short of providing any practical strategies for just how such pressure can be generated and how ASEAN and countries of the West can every be encouraged to cooperate on this issue.

This meeting like so many before it and like so many publications (including this one), have emphasized more the discussion of the problems rather than strategies for effective action. So, for the time being at least, international support for the justice struggle in Burma seems to be grappling in the dark for the most effective way to help bring about a true peace process.

What can we do to help bring about a process for peace and justice in Burma? While it is not possible to outline a comprehensive and detailed strategy in this small space, perhaps it is important to throw out some ideas which might help us brainstorm and plan so that a peace process can more easily be initiated.

Aim

A unified aim is a good starting point. A positive aim for a strategy might be "to help create an atmosphere in which true cease fire and peace negotiations can finally take place". Effective negotiations can never take place unless all involved in the conflict can sit down as equals to share concerns, seek solutions, and solve problems. In the present alignment of power in Burma, one group, the military, holds the power. They not only have one of the largest mili-

tary ground forces in the region, but they also control foreign investments and international relations. When they sit down at the table to talk with any of the indigenous groups, they do so with this vast power behind them, and thus they can lay out the agenda and select or reject issues at their own whims. From this position they say, "You must agree with us (return to the legal fold) or suffer the consequences." Past experience shows that these consequences come in the form of military campaigns against civilian populations.

Only when this military power senses the need to seriously enter into honest negotiations for its own survival will this situation change. Pressure, both economic and political, is required to bring them to this position.

Creating the Pressure

Pressuring the military to participate in serious peace negotiations requires a variety of activities from many sectors. Following are some ideas as a start:

1) Opposition forces need to outline clearly the issues they want to lay out on the table in negotiations, the process for carrying out the negotiations, and steps for the ensuing change of power from military to civilian rule. This outline should detail the ethnic issues from the side of the indigenous groups and the political issues of the NLD. This strategy could then be presented to governments in Asia, Europe, America, as well as to the U.N. to seek support for the proposed process. With their support, the military would be under tremendous pressure to either agree to the process, or come under harsh criticism from the international community. This criticism would especially be effective if the international community were willing to link economic and political relations to the military's willingness to seriously commit themselves to this process.

2) A broader grassroots base of international support needs to be created to stand behind and influence international policy in relation to Burma. This mass base of support can be built up in educational institutions, labour unions, churches, and civic clubs. Providing these groups with information is only one step required. People need some on-going actions to help them participate and become more deeply aware of the justice issues to be addressed in Burma. Campaigns grow and become effective only when information is translated into dramatic and constant action by an ever growing number of people. The more grassroots this action is, the more solid and long-term it can become.

One form of action is that of boycotts. A boycott can serve two purposes. First it can, if done effectively, result in companies withdrawing from Burma in order to put economic pressure on the military. Secondly, and much more importantly, it can get more and more people involved in the campaign and aware of the issues thus creating a growing mass movement in support of peace and justice.

A good example is the Pepsi boycott initiated in the United States several years ago. The most successful aspect of this campaign is not that Pepsi is selling out its shares in Burma, but rather that groups across the United States, who only a few years ago hardly knew of the existence of Burma, are now very actively involved in learning about Burma and the human rights issues there. This includes universities, high schools, city governments and even labor groups. The Pepsi boycott gave them something to do and to build their awareness around. It helped make the Burma campaign in the US an active and growing campaign rather than keeping it in the meetings and forums as simple academic process



...AND THE HARVEST SHALL BE PLENTIFUL?

by Alice Davies

In Burma, during 1995, the price of rice soared due to high world grain prices and SLORC's endeavour to boost revenue through the increased export of rice. Apparently, they believed there to be more reserves held by traders than there actually were and the attempt to meet the export level nearly exhausted existing stocks. Since December 1995, this situation has eased and the state has guaranteed domestic sufficiency, before exporting. 400,000 tonnes is expected to be exported this year compared with the 1.1 million of last year.

Burma's situation is complicated, mainly on two counts. Domestic consumption is the highest in Asia. Also, Burma's rice production is very poor, especially compared with its SE Asian neighbours. This is due to population growth, past economic and land mismanagement: a fact acknowledged by the deputy Director-General of the Ministry of Agriculture's Department of Agricultural Planning. Degraded soil is a result of past overuse and mismanagement, overplantation (which leads to decreased productivity and an increased need for fertilizers), inadequate use of fertilizers and chemicals in the soil, poor agricultural credit facilities and lack of infrastructure and equipment and poor irrigation, land reclamation and drainage. The policy to increase rice production by increasing acreage, including the increasing use of marginal land (often at the expense of the forests) as arable land, is ineffective and increased yield should be technology (including new hybrid strains of rice) oriented, not area-oriented.

The Ministry of Agriculture may review its decision to triple crop, concentrating on a single monsoon followed by summer paddy crop. It is also trying to upgrade farmer's knowledge, through television and newspaper advertisements, to make them aware of the major changes be-

ing implemented in the agricultural sector.

The main rice producing areas, accounting for 65% of the total rice production, are Pegu, Irrawaddy (the main rice production area, which crops were damaged by floods during 1995), Rangoon and Mon states and divisions. While rice paddy production increased by 2% between 1984-94 and the area harvested by 2.5% for the same period, actual yield decreased by 0.4%. The consumption of fertilizer has decreased and has long been among the lowest in Asia. This is largely due to high prices and the lack of cash or access to farm credit facilities, the only way most small farmers are able to purchase it. Interest rates on private loans from money-lenders run at 4%-5% per month, compared with the official credit facility's 18% per annum.

One source said that 'the insurgencies should not have affected the overall economy...which is at the lower end of operation', for the reasons cited above. While the overall economy may not be affected by the insurgencies, the people in the border areas are reporting systematic destruction, procurement and confiscation of food supplies by SLORC and DKBA troops. Comments such as 'They [DKBA troops] destroyed all my rice and all the rice barns, so there is no rice left in the village...They took all the rice from every house and our storehouses and threw it on the ground, they burned the rice storehouses...when they saw the rice stored in safe places outside the village they burned that too...' belie such bald statements.

The Myanma Agricultural Produce Trading (MAPT), under the Ministry of Trade, procures a paddy quota from farmers of 12 baskets per acre, at the 'government rate', which is about one third of the open market rate. This is 80kyat/basket for Fmhata rice and 110kyat for the long grain quality, a 10% increase from the 1994/5 fiscal

year. MAPT procurement for 1995/6 was 100 million baskets of paddy, about 1.25 million tonnes of rice. 500,000 of this is for defence force and government employee consumption. The balance is exported.

One source noted that malnutrition was a function of income, rather than scarcity of food. Increased production might help alleviate rural poverty, but consideration needed to be taken of the annually increasing rural population. An increased household income (in conjunction with increased female literacy, education and family planning) would improve nutrition rates.

Burma has a National Plan of Action from the 1992 World Food Summit and will presumably participate in the next one, later this year. As there is no systematic gathering of information within Burma, statistics on nutrition/malnutrition are virtually non-existent. One UNICEF report indicates that the overall figures for the Union are moderate child malnutrition 41% and severe malnutrition 1.2%.

A 1996 FAO report indicates that production for 1995, is estimated at 19.6 million tonnes, an increase of about 8% over the previous year's harvest and 22% above the average of the past five years. Increased production is attributed to an above average use of fertilizers and area planted, from 5.9 million hectares in 1994 to 6.2 million hectares in 1995, the provision of high yielding seed, the introduction of farm machinery and improved farming techniques. Irrigation supply, particularly in the Irrawaddy Delta, has improved and the state has been 'investing in the improvement and construction of dams and irrigation channels.'

Sources:

Personal interviews

KHRG#96-07, #96-10, #96-11

IN THE NEWS

NEWS BRIEFS FOR JULY

Fighting between Burmese Army and Karenni rebel soldiers inside Burma's eastern state of Kayah has forced more than 4,000 Karenni refugees to flee across the Thai border into Mae Hong Son province since Thursday, the provincial governor, Somjetn Viriyadamrong, said.

TN 960716

The Karen National Union has rejected the demand by SLORC to lay down arms before signing a peace agreement.

BP 960717

Burma's future membership of ASEAN will prove 'useful and meaningful' to the regional grouping, said Burmese Foreign Minister, U Ohn Gyaw, in his speech to the opening of the 29th ASEAN Ministerial meeting.

TN 960721

Carlsberg Brewery has halted all its beer exports to Burma. Following boycott threats by the Danish Burma Committee, Carlsberg also dropped plans for a joint venture. Denmark is demanding European Union sanctions against Burma

following the death of James Leander Nichols, honorary consul for Denmark, Finland, Norway and Switzerland.

TN 960714

Dutch brewer, Heineken, announced the withdrawal of its \$30 million investment on Wednesday 10th July, after months of protests by human rights groups.

BP 960712

State-run newspapers said that Aung San Suu Kyi must cease her activities and leave Burma if the USA wants to discuss matters of mutual interest.

TN 960711

Thailand has repeated its refusal to interfere in Burma's internal affairs, in a cautious response to Aung San Suu Kyi's letter, calling for help to begin dialogue with the ruling military government.

BP 960717

French firm, Total, has rejected allegations of using forced labour on the

pipeline construction. Despite this, a number of investors, including a Danish pension fund, Kommunernes Pensionsforsikring, have sold shares, favouring instead Elf-Aquitaine, the other major French oil group. Total's shares closed 0.44% lower in a market which closed on average 0.61% higher.

BP 960720

The second Myanmar Medical and Pharmaceutical Expo '96 is due to be held at the Tatmadaw Convention Centre in Rangoon, from 17-20 October 1996

BP 960716

The Thai Industry Ministry is seeking ways to encourage Burma to join with Thailand to develop deep sea ports and jointly invest in natural gas-related industries.

BP 960701

BURMA ISSUES

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THAILAND

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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