

BURMA ISSUES

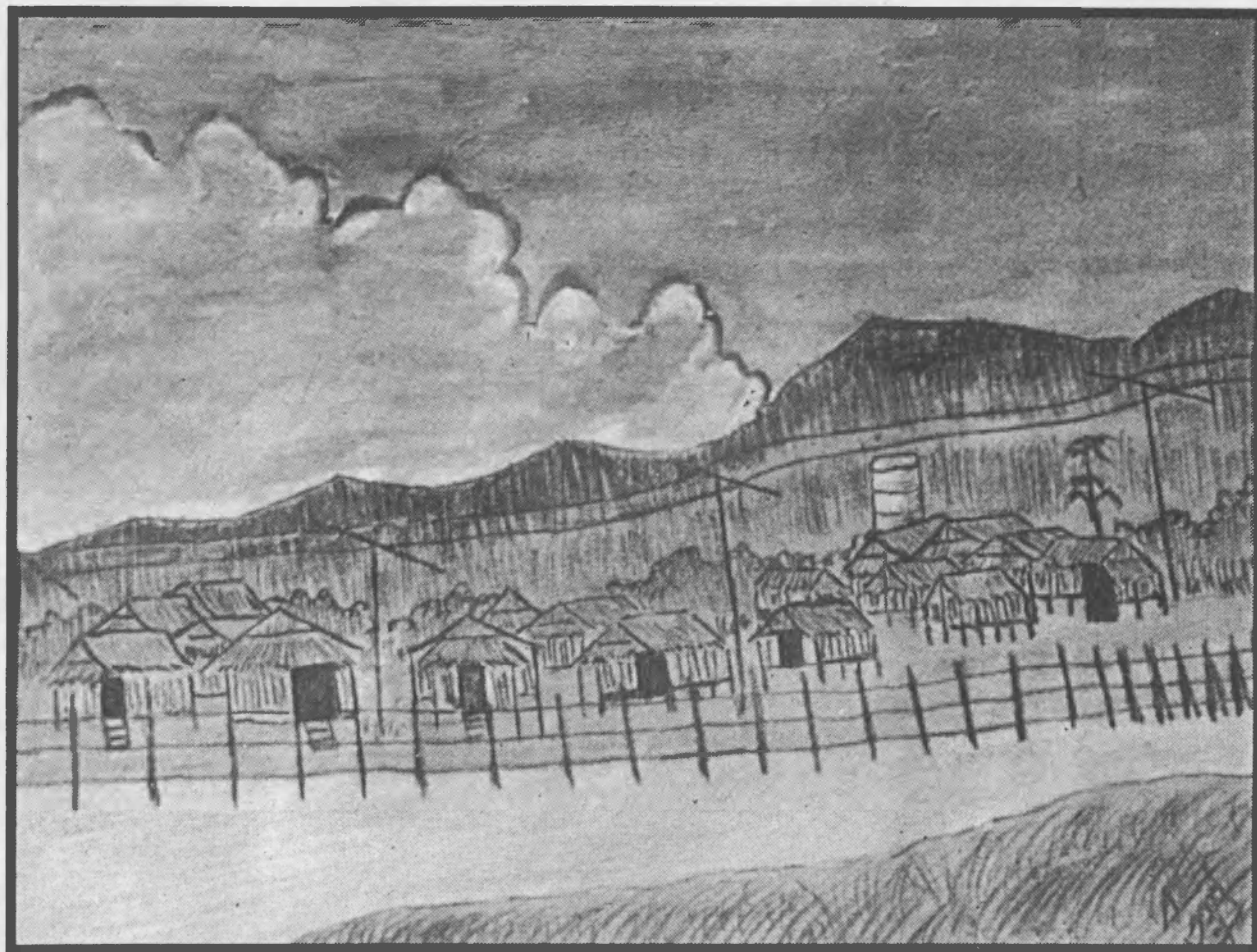
News, Analysis & Peoples' Stories

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"Human rights are the latest USA 'mantras' to subjugate any Asian country. Therefore, Myanmar is no exception. ... It seems the US and West are still interested in neo-colonialism."

– Burma's ambassador to India during an interview with The Free Press Journal on the eve of the ninth anniversary of the people's uprising in Burma.



Painting by Mo Shay Po.

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Burma Issues, the monthly newsletter of Burma Issues, highlights current information related to the struggle for peace and justice in Burma. It is distributed internationally on a free-subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned about the state of affairs in Burma.
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INSIDE

- ❷ HUMAN RIGHTS: Burma Army operations in Kya Inn Township
- ❸ REFUGEES: International responsibility
- ❹ CIVIL WAR: Elusive peace
- ❺ COMMENT: A new paradigm for activism
- ❻ POLITICS: Peace & Development: New name, same old story?
- ❼ THE LAST WORD: What others have to say about Burma

BURMA ARMY OPERATIONS IN KYA INN TOWNSHIP

The statements below were made by civilians who recently fled from their villages in Kya Inn Township area Dooطلا District, Karen State. In February 1997, the Burma Army launched a massive offensive against the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) in southern Karen State and parts of northern Mon State, which quickly resulted in the occupation of large areas formerly under the control of the Karen National Union (KNU). In many areas, organized armed resistance ended within a week.

The people in the group were interviewed shortly after they arrived in Thailand in October and November, 1997. They had waited in their villages or at relocation sites for over seven months after the Burma Army had successfully occupied the area, in the hopes that the situation would improve. It did not, though the war in these areas was clearly over.

Newly-occupied areas are typically pacified using a "cut, clear and cleanse" strategy, where villagers are first cut off from contact with insurgent military groups, cleared from their villages and forcibly relocated to one centralized area, usually adjacent to an army camp, and the population is cleansed of weapons and insurgents by use of intimidation and torture. Other typical abuses faced in newly-occupied areas include forced labor on access roads and other projects, forced portering, extortion/excessive taxation and extortion, confiscation and/or destruction of food and other property, and religious and cultural persecution.

Many of the people in the group interviewed are Ta La Ku, members of a Karen Buddhist sect who live a very disciplined and orthodox lifestyle in accordance with their religious beliefs. A primary Ta La Ku concern is the preservation of and survival of their culture. Because of their strict codes for behavior, Ta La Ku often live in remote areas and traditionally try to minimize contact with outsiders, including other non-Ta La Ku Karen. The fact that this group finally decided to abandon their homes and leave their sacred places is an indicator of the severity of the difficulties they faced inside Burma.

Karen man, Ta La Ku leader

I am responsible for the preservation of the Ta La Ku religious and cultural mores. Being under the control of the military government is very difficult. We faced a lot of problems and hardship under Slorc control. The Slorc called

us to go back [from Thailand] and work together with them for a better life. It was very difficult to work together with them [before]. We had to do whatever they told us to do. The Burma Army soldiers called us useless turbaned Karen ringworms [the Ta La Ku men wear their hair long and in turbans]. It was very painful to hear them abuse us like that, but we could still bear the burden. The only burden



Ta La Ku man, Dooطلا district. [KHRG]

we could not bear was forced portering. The loads were enough for horses and elephants to carry but they demanded that we humans carry them. If one of us could not carry, they would kick us and beat us severely.

Eventually, we called a meeting to discuss these matters with other Ta La Ku people, because according to our religion and traditional lifestyle it is hard for to stay among other people. We agreed that we would come to Lay Taw Kho [a Ta La Ku village in Thailand, a religious center.] If we just stayed on in our village, our difficulties would keep getting worse. Our religion and culture would be destroyed. If we come to here to Lay Taw Kho, we can maintain our religion and culture. To make it easier for us to come here, I wrote to the villagers and told them that we would go to Lay Taw Kho for a religious ceremony. A lot of people came together. [This way,] if we died then we would die together with our reli-

gion and culture at our religious center. I wrote to the local Slorc authority and asked him to come up here [to find us at Lay Taw Kho] if they want us to go back. We won't run away. We will stay here with our respected religious leaders.

Slorc asked us to go back. They said that they wouldn't treat us badly and harshly the way they've done before. They said that they won't ask us to work [do unpaid "voluntary" labor], but we do not trust them. We told them that if they want us to go back then let their authorities come to our place and make an agreement in front of our leader that they won't oppress us any longer and drink *thit sa ye* to complete the vow, so if they abuse us all the abuse and problems will return to them. [If a person who drinks *thit sa ye* when making a vow, it is believed that the person will suffer or even die if the promise is ever broken] If they agreed to do it in the way we ask, then we would go back. They sent a message in reply: "There is no way we will obey orders from villagers."

We left all our property and rice stores behind in our village. We don't have any food and we have no rice fields here in Lay Taw Kho, so I asked people "What should we do in this situation?" We want to go to a place where we can get rice, but when we think about our religion, we realize cannot go there [to other refugee sites] because the way we eat and the way we live is different from other people. If we go there we will lose our religion. We worship together four times a month. We will have to stay here

die with our religion.

Ta La Ku people have very strict rules which all the Ta La Ku have to obey. For instance, men cannot wear trousers and women cannot wear skirts or long dresses, they must wear sarongs and shirts which they make themselves. Unmarried women must wear traditional white smocks, which they weave themselves. They must be the same style as the old Karen wore in ancient times.

We asked permission from the Thai authorities to let us stay here in Lay Taw Kho. People who are not Ta La Ku members can go further into the refugee camp. Currently there are 165 families totaling about 800 Ta La Ku people staying here. There are some people who have not arrived yet. None of us could carry rice along with us.

The village people helped each other. We hope

that we'll get help from overseas organizations. Some people stay in friends' houses, some with relatives, and some build their own shelters. Because we have had to move to this new place most of the families have developed various health problems. In one family we [typically] have two or three sick people. People have fever, malaria and coughs. We have to buy medicines in the shop. There is no doctor [here], no nurses and no school for the children. We are very worried about food because we have no food right now.

Ta La Ku Karen man, 38

I came here because I could not bear the Slorc oppression any longer. There are too many problems – I cannot speak out [about all of them]. For instance, during summer of 1997, a landmine exploded between G and V villages. I was in G village that night. The next morning when I came back to my village I met soldiers on my way back home and they beat me. They asked me, "Where do you live?" and I said, "I'm from O village."

Then they told me I had to use my cart to clear the road of landmines. They got some other carts too. They told us to fill baskets with sand and put them on our carts to make the carts heavier. Altogether, there were six carts, including mine. I had to clear the road of landmines between M village and D village. One cart would go in the middle of the road, one to one side of the road and one off to one side of the road completely [and the second three would follow in the same pattern on the other side of the road]. This was the system they used to clear landmines. I was incredibly worried, but I was lucky and we didn't find any landmines that day. Since then I have felt unsafe.

man, Buddhist

There were forty families in my village. The whole village had to relocate between the end of September and the 4th of October. There was no other choice. They didn't accept it if anyone didn't want to go. They said that families who did not want to go are the families who are in contact with the KNU.

My father is very old and he is blind so I told [the commander], "This old man cannot go; he will stay here." They told me to carry him to the new site. They beat and punched me. The commander "Maung Win" himself beat me. He said that I had contacted the rebels, and that I hadn't informed him when the rebels came back. I told him that the rebels hadn't come back. "Maung Win" didn't trust me; he said that when the rebels came back I had fed them and given them pigs. I said that it was not true but he didn't believe me, and he continued to beat me.

Continued on page 7

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

"The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody. The greatest evil is the lack of love and charity, the terrible indifference toward one's neighbor who lives at the roadside, assaulted by exploitation, corruption, poverty and disease." – Mother Teresa

1997 was not an auspicious year for the people of Burma. Thousands of villagers continued to flee into neighboring countries, escaping gross human rights abuses committed by the Burma Army. At least ten thousand new arrivals supplemented around 21,000 as yet non-repatriated Rohingyas in Bangladesh. Thailand still accommodates the greatest number of asylum seekers, both within the confines of "temporary shelters" (the Thai government's official term for refugee camps), and as registered and unregistered migrant laborers throughout the country. Both countries have tightened border crossings and admission into camps, in conjunction with acts of forced repatriation. In Bangladesh, increasingly restrictive policies resulted in violent responses, and a mass hunger strike, by refugee camp communities feeling at risk of involuntary repatriation to Burma.

Administrative approaches that deny the nature of the problem or the rights of these people to be afforded some kind of protection also serve to escalate the number of genuine asylum seekers who remain unaccounted for, rather than actually reducing the real number of people crossing the border. Most of these simply disperse further into Thailand, in the hope of finding work by which to survive. They risk arrest, detention in overcrowded holding centers, police brutality and extortion while awaiting deportation. Deteriorating economic conditions in Thailand have resulted in greater numbers of these people who are unable to find any work, at increased exposure to arrest and deportation. So-called 'economic migrants' conservatively number 700,000 in Thailand, 70,000 in Malaysia and an unknown number in Bangladesh. Clearly a situation in which people are willing to risk perhaps their entire livelihoods, if not their lives in fleeing to a second country, illustrates a desperate situation and one that is not being addressed with compassion by the nations in which sanctuary is sought.

The international community has an obligation to continue pressuring Thailand and Bangladesh to adhere to international norms of protection. Likewise, the Association of Southeast Nations (Asean) governments must be encouraged to "constructively intervene" in promoting a peaceful transition

to democracy in Burma, given its admission to the regional grouping in July this year. In accepting Burma as a member, Asean has in effect accepted responsibility to try and bring political change to Burma, given that internal developments in any one of its member countries can destabilize regional security. However, to date Asean adheres to its principle of "noninterference in internal affairs" of member states. Non-government organizations and Asean dialogue partners (namely the US, the EU, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) have encouraged Asean nations to pursue the issue of human rights in Burma, but have rarely gone substantively beyond mere rhetoric, hence the lack of tangible success.

The international community must do more for the people of Burma. For example, substantive pressure should be exerted on the regime to implement the recommendations of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights unanimous resolution of April 16, 1997 – to cease the abusive practices which lead to refugee outflows, and create the necessary conditions for voluntary return of refugees in safety and dignity.

That thousands of refugees have continued to flood Thailand and Bangladesh this year exposes the fallacy in arguing that human rights violations and political repression are just an "internal affair". Ultimately, all parties must recognize that human rights issues relate directly to the international responsibilities and national interests of other states. Rather than pursuing short term, two-dimensional policies of self-interest, the multifarious states ought to adopt this principle as a general basis for decision making. This approach would surely lead to far more genuine and durable resolutions benefiting all concerned.



V.J.C.

ELUSIVE PEACE

The year is coming to an end and yet peace remains as elusive as ever for the people of Burma. In fact, many observers feel the situation has worsened during the past year despite Burma's entrance into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) on July 23. The Alternative Asean Network on Burma (Altsean), a network of human rights organizations from around Southeast Asia, recently gave the Burmese military a failing grade on their performance of the past few months. In a report entitled "First Month Report Card - Slorc's Progress as a Member of Asean", Altsean rated the situation regarding human rights abuses, refugees, situation of the democracy movement, the economy, and international relations as deteriorating rather than improving. Indeed, the number of refugees increased from a little under 100,000 at the beginning of the year, to over 120,000 by year's end. Many thousands of internally displaced persons are sitting on the Burma side of the Thai/Burma border awaiting opportunity to seek a safe haven inside Thailand. Their situation is appalling. Hundreds of thousands of other people were forcibly relocated throughout Burma during the year, and many thousands more illegally entered Thailand in search of work and sanctuary, hiding in towns and cities throughout the country rather than entering refugee camps for fear of being forcibly repatriated.

As we enter 1998, there is hope to change this dreary record of human suffering and despair into a promising process towards a true and lasting peace for all if coordinated and well-focused campaigns are carried out by both the opposition groups in Burma and the international community. Some of the issues which need to be taken into consideration in creating these campaigns should include the following.

1. A comprehensive and focused strategy for peace

There is tremendous energy flowing around the world which can be harnessed for peace in Burma. Pro-Burma democracy campaigns in North America and Europe have continued to grow during the past years. Altsean has brought together a variety of excellent activists and organizations from Asean countries which are merging their power to bring about policy change at the Asean level. But all of this activity has only limited potency unless it is carefully focused at the military's weak points and is carried out in a step by step process which is carefully planned and coordinated.

This step by step strategy needs to be drawn up by opposition groups in great detail so that international campaigns can better identify their targets and develop more effective tactics to reach those targets. Power to end dicta-

torship and usher in peace and stability is not created by being busy, but rather by being effective, and effectiveness comes only from comprehensive planning and close coordination.

2. Tripartite Dialogue

The Burmese military will more than likely attempt to initiate bipartite dialogue between themselves and the NLD, as this will give them a distinct advantage in any future negotiations. This must not be allowed to happen. The conflict in Burma has a long and complex history. It can not be brought to an end easily. In order to effectively begin a process towards true peace, the issues which initiated the conflict in the first place must be placed on the table and dealt with openly and courageously. For this to happen, any dialogue between the NLD and the military must also immediately include the various ethnic groups, which have been struggling for self-determination for well over 50 years. To allow any dialogue to begin without their presence from the very beginning is to sideline their issues. This sidelining can not lay the ground work for a peaceful and enduring resolution to the conflict.

The international community must educate themselves on the history of the various conflicts within Burma so that they can respond to events in appropriate and positive ways. The Burmese military is adept at divide and rule strategies and at creating facades which confuse the fundamental issues in the eyes of the international community. A detailed knowledge of the situation is one of the best defenses against such confusion and deception. If the root causes of the conflict are not carefully addressed, any progress in a peace process is threatened with failure.

3. Protection of Refugees

There are over 120,000 refugees from Burma living in refugee camps scattered along the Thai/Burma border. Several hundred thousand more are hiding outside the camps. All live in fear of being sent back to their villages before they deem it safe.

The issue here, which must be clearly recognized by the international community, is that the majority of these refugees have not fled actual fighting between the Burmese military and the various insurgency groups. Thus, under Thai policy, they are not true refugees, but rather illegal aliens. Accordingly, they face the threat of repatriation if and when Thai authorities feel it is appropriate for them to be sent home.

Refugees do not always flee from flying bullets and exploding mortars. Refugees also flee

from military abuses such as rape, murder, extortion, slavery, and military-induced starvation. These are just as deadly as bullets and bombs, and the people who flee from either require the same kind of international protection and assistance.

Every effort must be made to ensure that these refugees are promised a safe haven in Thailand until they, themselves, feel they can return to their homes with their families in a safe and secure manner. That depends on the ability of the opposition and the international community to effectively lay the groundwork for a credible peace process which strikes at the root causes of the suffering which led to their exodus in the first place.

Should the refugees be forced to return to their villages before their safety and well-being can be guaranteed, they will most likely again be forced to flee into Thailand because of continuing military abuse. This time they may choose not to enter refugee camps which they feel do not provide them with safety. This will create an even more difficult and complex problem for Thailand to solve.

To ensure the refugees have proper security when they return, a solution to the root causes of the civil war is once again crucial.

Conclusion

The new year must bring with it new hope for those who have suffered so much for so long in Burma. This will require, first of all, a very clear analysis of the source of conflict which has existed within the society. Then a detailed strategy can be created which will slowly chip away at that source of conflict, while at the same time building democratic counter structures which will insure that all people in Burma can live in a future of peace and dignity.



Nyein Chan

A NEW PARADIGM FOR ACTIVISM

December, as a month of renewed military offensives in Burma, seems to me like an odd time to step back and evaluate the movement for peace in Burma. While the year's end is marked with celebrations and times of reflection for us on the outside, the grassroots people inside Burma have to cling more tightly to the remaining threads of Burma's social fabric, worn thin by decades of conflict. The year end marks the beginning of the dry season, when, historically, the warfare which slowed over the rainy season will begin again, and the Burmese military complex will again intensify its effort to force its own fibers further into the warp and weft of Burma's social tapestry. In the process, some communities will be razed, civilians will be killed, insurgents will take up arms to kill their countrymen, and a multitude of other abuses will occur, leaving little time for making repairs to Burma's education and health systems, addressing production and abuse, promoting honest reconciliation, building a sustainable economy, or solving any other dysfunctions. While opposition groups, international NGOs and other Burma-related organizations reflect, people are senselessly dying. Yet, if they continue to act without reflecting, people will continue to die.

The Slorc has been in power for nine years now, and 1998 would have marked the regime's first decade of rule had they not changed their name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). What does this mean for the people of Burma and those outside Burma who are working for peace? Perhaps we, as groups working for political change in Burma, should not be so quick to insult the regime's capability to rule Burma, unless we are also willing to admit that the junta is in power partly due to our ineffectiveness in promoting change. I hesitate to say that we are ineffective, especially in light of all the work, all the protests and all the seminars we're holding. The North American Burma activists encourage me with every new sanction they successfully lobby it feels good to hear about boycotts that result in corporate divestments. But where are the signs inside Burma? How has the village-level movement grown over the past nine years? Protests, meetings and special reports aside, what have all the Burmese dissident groups accomplished?

Several months ago I attended a commemoration of the August 8 uprisings. After passing a line of T-shirts, posters and other knickknacks for sale, participants proceeded to a catered buffet table of hotel entrées and desserts. Several opposition members spoke about the evils of the Slorc, while activists dined in total luxury compared to the grassroots people of Burma. Events like this held in the name of solidarity or awareness, and there are many, make me cynical about the appropriation of funds and effectiveness of some opposition groups. While high-profile meetings attract the international media, often they seem to involve the same groups of people with the same ideas, neither of which are focused on directly empowering the grassroots.

Among the majority of Burmese opposition groups here in Southeast Asia, I have also noticed two alarming tendencies. Firstly, factionalization is rampant. New groups are continually forming; some arise by splintering off other organizations while others are built from the bottom up. Amidst all the acronyms and mission statements – which

often overlap – I see little cooperation. Are these groups carrying out their own activities with little concern for redundancy and a lack of interest in mutual communication and cooperation? Secondly, Burmese opposition leadership lacks diversity to the point of stagnation. Too often I see traveled, educated, somewhat comfortable men representing the people of Burma. While being traveled and educated are not bad qualities in and of themselves, they can also be used to guarantee a level of authority that stifles outside voices of creativity. Where are the women? Where is there room for the village-level wisdom that comes from non-formal educational experiences, rather than the knowledge that comes from a diploma or the status that comes from heritage or material objects? I feel as though many opposition forces, rather than creating a new alternative to the model of repressive leadership in Burma, have built a hyped-up democratic movement based on the existing structure of elitism.



A sign at Mahamuni Pagoda, Burma. [Burma Issues]

After nine years of little positive change in Burma, it is high time groups working for political change in Burma move their focus beyond the concept of democracy, move their goal beyond overthrowing the current regime, and take a more holistic view. If the SPDC generals were to leave tomorrow, what would the opposition groups have to replace them with? A blend of the NLD, KNU, United Wa State Army, influential businessmen and other factions all operating on similar patriarchal and corrupt structures of leadership?

Perhaps opposition groups should reflect more on how to implement a new paradigm for action that is truly based on the grassroots and equality, a paradigm that can effectively address and rebuild Burma's social fabric. Groups could start by considering how they, as a community working for peace in Burma, can be more peaceful towards each other and resolve the issues that cause factionalization. Each one must realize the connection between the inability to be peaceful with each other and the effect it has on the grassroots people's suffering. If opposition groups hope to promote national reconciliation and peace, they need to first reconcile differences in ethnicity, gender and class between and within themselves. They can and should put more energy into communicating and cooperating together in a concerted effort, rather than duplicating each other out of a desire to have leadership positions or avoid the need for dialogue and eventual compromise. The struggle for peace in Burma is not a struggle for personal status or influence but a community effort to promote liberation and mutual respect. Until Burmese opposition groups learn to listen to all members of the community, they will remain weak in their ability to function effectively as a group.

At the same time, groups working for peace in Burma must use their resources efficiently to empower those who need empowerment the most. I mean to imply that for organizations based around Burma, more energy should be invested in training dedicated grassroots people than in the relatively expensive and external-focused international campaigns. Organizations should try to avoid holding conferences that focus more on academic information without any emphasis on how the grassroots can actively utilize the information. Organizations can also try to involve more grassroots people in conferences instead of inviting and

Continued on page 7

PEACE & DEVELOPMENT: NEW NAME, SAME OLD STORY?

The Slorc has become history. On November 16, 1997, official media sources announced that the State Law and Order Restoration Council – the Slorc – had officially dissolved itself, handing control to a new group, called the State Peace and Development Council (the SPDC). The new body consists of four former Slorc leaders and fifteen “new” high-ranking military officials – an unelected military junta still, but a new set of rulers, with, they would have us believe, a brand new set of policies.

It's easy to see the change as nothing but a slick public relations move to rename the the junta. US Secretary of State Albright was only stating the obvious when she remarked, “Slorc – an ugly name for an ugly regime.” Certainly Slorc's opponents have relished that ugly name against them. However, it may be that this State Peace and Development Council truly represents an adjustment to the changing situation in Burma. After all, Burma *has* seen significant change since the military took control of the government in 1962, and especially in the past few years. A period of all-out civil war seems to be winding down: for the first time in more than 50 years, the majority of Burma's ethnic insurgent groups have made cease-fire agreements with the government; though many questions remain about the tenability and even the legitimacy of many of these agreements. The last major insurgent group still at war with the government, the KNLA (Karen National Liberation Army), has suffered significant losses, and now looks more vulnerable than it ever has. Military operations continue in every corner of the country, but increasingly the Burma Army's focus has shifted from open warfare to tightening control in newly “pacified” areas, and implementing development projects.

If, indeed, the focus of Burma's government is changing with the times, is it a change that will benefit Burma's people? A lot depends on the way this new “Peace and Development” mandate will be interpreted into policy. If policy continues to be based on the generals' past interpretations of “peace” and “development”, it is difficult to be optimistic about Burma's future.

Burma's generals like the word “peace”, and according to all official statements, they seem to think that peace is a good idea, finding an opportunity in nearly every public speech to call for “the emergence of a peaceful, developed and modern nation.” The KNLA are often accused by Burma's state press of “ignoring the peace” as they continue their armed struggle for independence. The favored official term for making a cease-fire agreement or surrendering to the Burma Army, has been “laying down arms in exchange for peace.” It appears that “peace” is a commodity generated, or otherwise made available to the people of Burma through the ruling junta.

Is important to look at what kind of peace the junta has going. One of the ugliest illustrations of the army's interpretation of peace is occurring throughout the newly “pacified” zones throughout the insurgent border areas. Large territories formerly under insurgent control are now occupied by the Burma Army, where the last remaining traces of opposition are being eliminated using a “cut, clear, and cleanse” strategy. This involves cutting areas off from food, information, and trade, clearing all inhabitants from large areas and relocating them to sites, usually adjacent to a military camp, and cleansing all insurgents and weapons from the population by use of intimidation and torture. “Pacification” is thorough and systematic, leaving an entire population completely impoverished, with many families under orders to relocate hiding out in the jungles or on the move, while others end up living at relocation sites under conditions of such scarcity that their primary concern is

simply survival. Insurgency can hardly continue under such conditions, but no one living this way would call it “peace”.

In other areas of Burma which have not been at civil war, Burma's version of “peace” has been implemented differently, but with the same thoroughness and inflexibility. Burma is famous for its comprehensive restrictions on assemblies, groups, organizations, and information. The goal has clearly been to eliminate any kind of dissident activity whatsoever. Interestingly, the new SPDC's first official Order, issued December 1, significantly reduces sentences for convicted criminals, and commuting death sentences to life imprisonment. Thousands of the prisoners this law may benefit were sentenced for political acts such as writing and publishing unsanctioned material, organizing unions, or failing to register organizations or even communications equipment with the government. As with many of the other changes in Burma, a little history encourages cynicism: one Burma watcher remarked that the prisons were also cleared during the turbulent year of 1988, when crackdowns brought thousands of new prisoners into the system. Only time will dispel such cynicism, and show if this law heralds new movement toward a more peaceful Burma.

Likewise, the military junta's “development” of Burma cannot be dismissed as only rhetoric. Sums of money *are* being spent on construction around the country, though reports indicate that many projects are funded using money extorted from the local populace. Projects include structures recognized as measures of modernity, including railroad track and car roads, hotels, bridges, dams, and irrigation projects of every kind.

There is no denying that Burma's infrastructure needs all kinds of improvement. However, less tangible and less photogenic development projects which would directly affect the standard of living for the average citizen are neglected in comparison. Free education and adequate healthcare are still unavailable to the majority of Burmese. Where social services are available, other conditions, such as forced labor, arbitrary taxation, corruption and poverty have made the situation so difficult that many can still not afford medicines or school supplies. The higher education system has been so crippled by repeated school closings and administrative changes that fewer and fewer are being adequately trained to work in health or education. Probably the single most serious problem is that, due to runaway inflation and excessive taxation, the salary for a government employee in Burma is not even enough to buy adequate food for a family. Those who quit their jobs face fines and other punishments, but there is no reward for staying: they lack decent pay, resources, adequate training to serve Burma's citizens. Under such a system, everyone ends up with too little.

Unfortunately, implementation of these projects often shows little concern for local welfare. Projects are generally hastily built, using local (forced) labor. In the majority of cases, locals end up having to donate cash as well as the labor to build the project, and the land for these projects is confiscated without adequate remuneration. By the look of things in the state-run media, Burma's people are being provided with endless tourist hotels, dams, and bridges – but more cement will not address the fundamental problem that people's basic needs for education and health are still not being met.

According to one of the SPDC's first statements, this new ruling group was formed “to ensure the emergence of an orderly and democratic system”. Of course, the military junta's idea of “democracy” so far has had nothing to do with handing power over to a democratically elected

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government. If, as this new system emerges, the junta does not reinterpret their old definitions of the words "peace" and "development", and "democracy", things for Burma's citizens will not improve. The junta will go with the current grand show "developing" Burma with new buildings and roads; and making "peace" through restriction, repression and mass assemblies. Perhaps they already know that if the people of Burma were able to define their own version of "peace" and "development", and "democracy," chances are good it wouldn't have much to do with Burma's ruling elite, whatever their name.



E.M.

Continued from 'Kya Inn', page 3

While the battalion commander talked to me, his soldiers called the village secretary and asked him to show them the rebels' hideouts [see story below], but they found nothing. The commander talked to them by walkie-talkie and asked if they had found any of the rebels' places. His soldiers reported that they hadn't found anything. Then the commander told them, "The secretary will never find the place you want to see if you don't beat him." Then the soldiers started beating the village secretary and [eventually] the secretary escaped. So "Maung Win" told me "Now the secretary has run away, and he is going to contact the rebels." So he beat me [again].

I came here because I cannot stay there any longer. I couldn't sleep at night because I couldn't stop thinking about all our problems.

We have no time to work for ourselves [because of forced labor and forced portering]. I came here on September 27th. Three families left the village that night. We had to walk all night. I couldn't sleep because I was afraid that the soldiers would follow us. I left everything behind in my house and the Slorc came and took it all.

People feel better once they arrive here, but we still have health problems such as diarrhea.

Buddhist man, 34, village secretary

The Burma Army came into our village and ordered me to be the village secretary. They came into the village quickly and later they accused me of having contact with the rebels. They said that when the rebels came I guided them. I said that I didn't meet with any of the rebels, but they didn't trust me. The platoon came the next day and told me to show them the rebels' hideout. They didn't find any rebels places and after they talked to their commander they started beating me and said that I didn't tell the truth. They said that B village and H villagers are all liars and that "Village people never tell the truth, so we must treat them very badly." After they beat me I ran away and hid in the forest for two days without food. When I came back to the village my father-in-law told me that the soldiers had already moved my wife and my children to H village. People warned me not to go into the village, they said "The Slorc will kill you". But I decided to go back anyway. I met the soldiers in the middle of the village. They talked to me very nicely and said

that I would have to carry a load enough for two men to carry and they said that they still would have to beat me five times. I thought that I could not face this, and I already had my wife and children back with me, so I ran away that night with my whole family. We slept two nights in the jungle on our way here.



A young Ta La Ku boy. [Burma Issues]

Sources, 'Kya Inn District'

Introductory notes, Karen Human Rights Group, Refugees from the Slorc Offensive, #97-07, 25 May 1997; Clampdown in the Southern Doooplaya, KHRG # 97-11, 18 September 1997.

Anonymous testimonies, gathered and translated by friends of Burma Issues.

Continued from 'Activists', page 5

relying on the usual activists. To involve the grassroots may mean that some conferences need to be held underground with less luxury and media pomp, but I believe that an empowering experience for someone on the margins of society can be more effective for the overall struggle than releasing another high-profile statement into the sea of media, only to be forgotten within a week. Acting in solidarity with the grassroots involves living and interacting in solidarity with the grassroots, not just speaking with them.

As promoters of peace and justice, let us spend the year end reflecting critically on ourselves, our assumptions and the paradigms we currently operate within. Instead of criticizing our opponents as the source of all strife in Burma, consider the effectiveness of our actions and the obstacles we have created. As we shout for human rights and human dignity, let us see the dignity within each other and begin to address the ways in which we fail to trust each other. In 1998, I would like to see peace grow from within the opposition community, because the grassroots people of Burma have spent too much time dying and waiting for the opposition to get its act together.



E.K.

The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"It is merely old wine in a new bottle. There are the same people in the new leadership. We can't expect too much out of this." – *A Rangoon-based diplomat commenting on the change from Slorc to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).*

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"I can understand perfectly well why some people insist on Asian values. The argument is that democracy is alien to Asia, because it emerged in the West. But do Burmese or Malaysian or Thai people, who can afford it, stop themselves from buying televisions, because they were not invented in Asia? Do they deny themselves the luxury of cars, air conditioners, because these things were not invented in the East?" – *Aung San Suu Kyi commenting on Asian values.*

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"To be clear, the difficulties posing Myanmar to become an active member of Asean could not be underestimated." – *Dr. Sein Win, Director General of the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, in a country paper on Burma's perspective of Asean integration.*

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"We should welcome this, but since the political prisoners shouldn't be there at all our joy is limited." – *A Rangoon-based diplomat, commenting on the recent announcement of a general reduction of current prison sentences in Burma.*

"There is no sign the regime has any intention of letting these [imprisoned members of the NLD] rejoin Aung San Suu Kyi. That would be real progress." *A diplomat, responding the recent announcement of the reduction of prison sentences.*

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"NLD has connections with terrorists and accommodates them. Some NLD members themselves are terrorists. ... The NLD has laid down a wrong strategy to create disturbances instead of setting up a new democracy nation. By doing so, the NLD is losing touch with the people." – *Excerpts from a commentary that appeared in all three Burmese official newspapers on November 7.*

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"The Code of Criminal Procedure and other subsequent Laws provide comprehensive legal framework and guarantees to ensure that a fair trial be given to every defendant at a law court. There are also legal safeguards against the abuse of legal proceedings during trial." – *An official Burmese government reply to a report titled "Attacks on Justice: The Harassment and Persecution of Judges and Lawyers" made by the Center for the Independence of Judges and Lawyers.*

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"They realised that in order to remain in power they needed a major shake-up and to polish their image." – *A political analyst in Rangoon, on the formation of the SPDC.*

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