

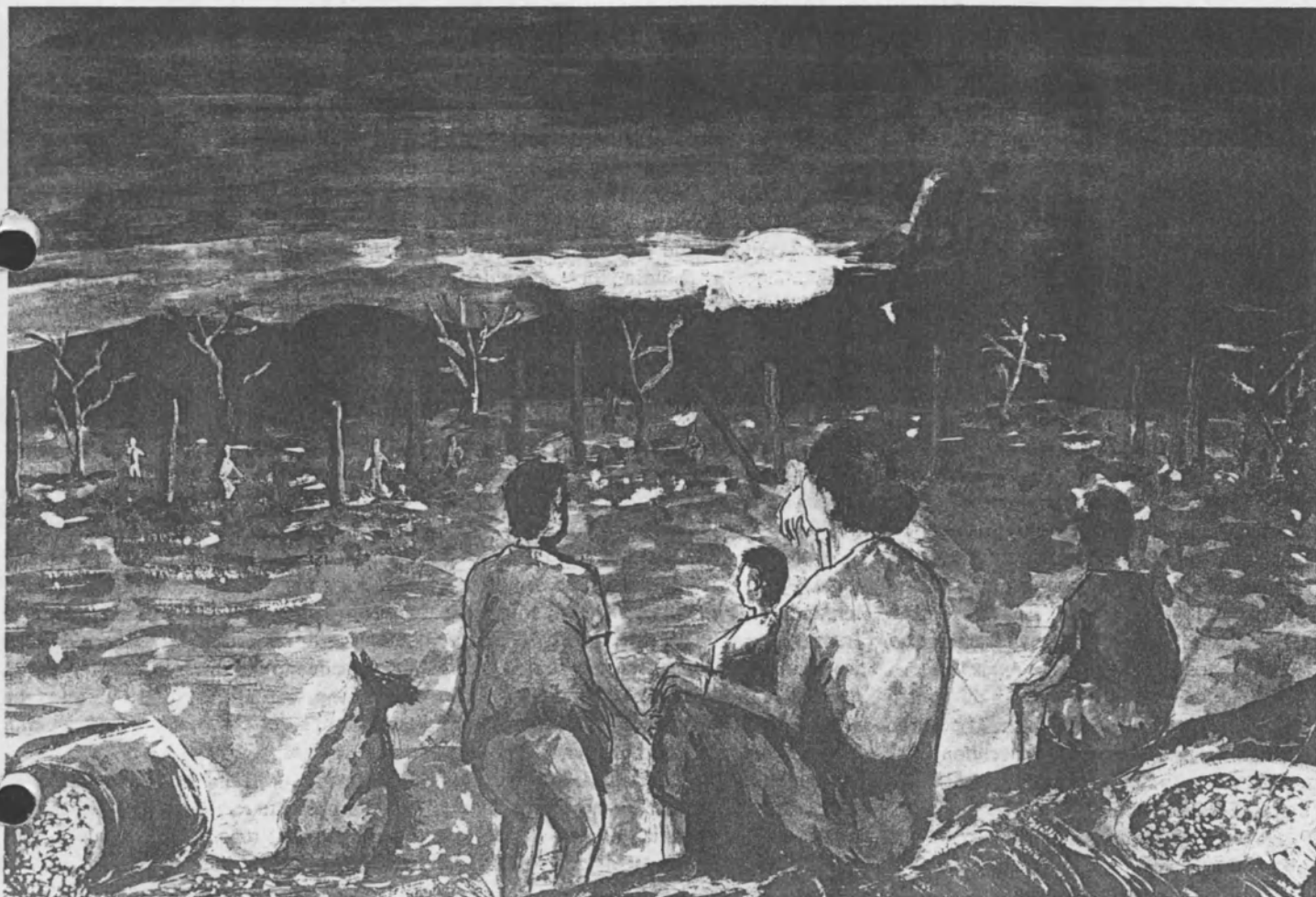
BURMA ISSUES

News, Analysis & Peoples' Stories

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"...there has been no change in the situation of human rights in Burma in the past year and ... there is still no concrete sign of improvement." – Judge Rajsoomer Lallah



Painting by Taw Nay Htoo, Huay Kalohe Refugee Camp

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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INFORMATION FOR ACTION

CAMPAIGNS FOR PEACE

GRASSROOTS EDUCATION AND ORGANIZING

TO FORCIBLY REPATRIATE OR NOT – THAILAND'S DILEMMA

"Alarming news of serious violations of human rights is coming out of Burma. The Karen living in that country are often suppressed and killed by Burmese troops. Refugees living in the most appalling situation in Thailand are forced to return to Burma into a very dangerous situation. About 5,000 Karen refugees were recently returned forcibly from Thailand, according to a document distributed by Associated Press." – Part of the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements' (Firmac) statement concerning Indigenous issues at the 53rd Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights.

In January this year, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Slorc) intensified its military campaign against the general population of Karen State. Karen villagers were subjected to forced portage, torture, rape and summary executions. To date around 20,000 Karen civilians have fled into Thai territory due to this latest offensive. The refugee population on the Thai/Burmese border has now risen to an estimated 120,000.

Between January and April, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the Burmese Army, attacked refugee camps inside Thailand. On January 28, Wangka camp in Mae Sot district and Don Pa Kiang camp in Mae Ramat district were burnt down by the DKBA and Slorc troops, making more than 10,000 refugees homeless. Threats continue to be made against the refugees in an effort to coerce them to return to Burma. The border refugee camps are vulnerable to cross border attacks and need to be moved to safer sites. It is urgent that the diplomatic community, human rights NGOs and the UNHCR respond to the need for protection and provide assistance to the refugees.

'Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.' Article 14 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948.

All member States of the UN are bound by the UDHR. Thailand has also signed and ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (ICCPR), the Convention of the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979.

The main legal instrument governing international standards of refugee treatment is the 1951 Refugee Convention. Thailand is not a signatory to the convention but is bound by certain provisions that are accepted as customary international law (CIL). The 'non-refoulement' provision has passed into CIL and provides that *legitimate refugees must be given safe asylum and may not be forcibly repatriated as long as they are in danger in their country of origin.*

Several human rights and relief organizations working with Burmese refugees have claimed the Royal Thai Army (RTA) forcibly repatriated refugees fleeing from the latest Slorc offensive and refused to grant refuge to civilians seeking to cross the border in February and March. In one instance, the RTA refused entry to 500 Karen men fleeing fighting and sent around 100 young men (reportedly as young as 10) to a war zone area. The RTA told the men and boys to continue fighting and urged them to defend their homes. Obvious non-combatants including sick and elderly men, priests and male children were among the group denied entry. The commanding general of the 9th Division, Maj Gen Thawip Suwansing denied these allegations explaining to the Bangkok Post's *Perspective* on March 9 that KNU members requested 'voluntary repatriation' for their family to safe areas so that they could go on fighting.

On February 27, some 3,000 refugees were forcibly repatriated from Kanchaburi province into areas a few hours walk from advancing Burmese troops. Then on March 2, 900 Karen women and children were repatriated from Ratchaburi province. Relief workers said the women and men had been separated and were in an area where there is no water, food or shelter, in imminent threat of attack and were near exhaustion by the time they were forcibly repatriated. The separation of family members is a violation of Article 16 of the UDHR: *"The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State."* This action is also arguably a violation of Article 4 of the ICCPR, which provides that State Parties undertake to *"ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights set forth in the present Covenant."*

The CRC adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 20, 1989 has been ratified by Thailand. The Convention reaffirms the fact that children, because of their vulnerability, need special care and protection, placing special emphasis on the primary caring and protective responsibility of the family. Article 22 provides for the protection of refugee children: *"special protection*

shall be granted to a refugee child or to a child seeking refugee status. It is the State's obligation to cooperate with competent organizations which provide such protection and assistance." Separating children from family members, sending boys as young as 10 years old back into war zone areas, and relocating children to areas that face imminent attack is a direct violation of this Convention. *"State Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that children under 15 years of age take no direct part in the hostilities...[and]...shall ensure the protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict as described in relevant international law."*

The US, UN, EU, Amnesty International and other human rights groups urged Thailand to halt any forcible return of the refugees and to recommence provision of asylum until conditions inside Burma permit their safe and voluntary return. Thailand's Army Commander-in-Chief, Chettha Tanajarno, and other top military brass insisted that the refugees "volunteered to return to a safe area in Burma" but called off the relocation and repatriation of the refugees due to the strong reaction by the international community and human rights groups.

On March 7, a team of Thai human rights groups presented Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai a report of its fact-finding mission on the refugee situation in Kanchaburi and requested that the government recognize the Karen exiles as refugees. This would enable the UNHCR to legitimately have a role in protecting and assisting the refugees on the border. The government responded by facilitating a UNHCR visit to the refugee camps but maintained it would allow only local organizations to care for the refugees. At the same time deportation reportedly resumed as an estimated 2,000 Karen men, women and children were pushed back into Burma from Kanchaburi province. Again the Thai military officials denied charges that they are forcing the refugees back into Burma, saying they disarmed fighters, asked them to return voluntarily and have ensured civilian families shelter by housing them away from the fighting at the border.

The National Security Council (NSC) meeting, chaired by Chavalit and attended by top military leaders on March 12, passed a resolution whereby Thailand will repatriate more than 100,000 ethnic minority refugees to Burma once fighting subsides. Chettha issued a statement following the NSC's resolution, that Thailand will not send refugees back into war zones but will enforce stricter rules to ensure law and order in refugee camps. Three days later it was reported that refugees in Kanchanaburi had been relocated, repatriated and family members separated.

On March 20, The Nation reported that the RTA tried to prevent the border crossing of about 1,000 Karen refugees fleeing from Burmese troops. Many of these people had been prevented from crossing the frontier into the northern province of Ratchaburi last month. The 9th Division refused to let these people enter, arguing that there was no imminent threat from the Burmese Army. The central authorities stated that they have agreed to let the 9th Division make the final judgement as to whether and when to allow the Karen to cross into Thailand. Border sources and relief groups reported that the Karen civilians were living well within range of Burmese mortar bombs and launched an international appeal for assistance.

On March 22, at a meeting between the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) and the 9th Division at Pu Muang camp, Colonel Manna, after Maung Aye assured him of the refugees safe return, gave a 3 hour lecture to the refugees outlining the benefits of returning to Burma. The KRC responded by urging the Thai government to allow the UNHCR to provide aid and assistance to the refugees. The Thai government insisted that it and NGOs were capable of handling the current situation, and that the refugees had not fled the kind of warfare that might be a condition for the presence of the UNHCR. Chettha said the government considered the latest influx of refugees as "victims of fighting inside Burma and not victims of warfare", and that UNHCR's presence would complicate the border situation and cause misunderstandings with Burma. If the UNHCR became involved, then the Thai government would have to consult them before repatriation could occur. Amnesty International said it was worried Thailand might repatriate once the latest offensive had ended saying "a halt in armed conflict does not in any way guarantee that the Burmese Army will stop ill-treating or killing Karen civilians."

On March 27, the *Bangkok Post* reported that

Thai troops pushed Karen men and boys back into a war zone and trucked 3,000 others away from where the Yadana gas pipeline project is planned. The Thai army also gave some refugees at Hti Hta Baw camp a two day ultimatum to be trucked south or return to Burma. Two hundred men were pushed back into the Minthamee area where Burmese troops were shelling.

Thailand's response to the refugee crisis has sent clear signals that it will only provide temporary asylum. The 2,700 refugees at Pu Muang camp were not provided with adequate shelter for the first two weeks after arrival. They received only one plastic sheet per family and were not granted permission to build

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any temporary structures. The Thai army destroyed a temporary bamboo structure built to house Burman monks. Recently, the Burmese Border Consortium has been granted permission to provide materials for the refugees to build platforms as it has started to rain daily. The UNHCR was not given permission to access the camp, and it went without medical assistance for about four days. More than half the refugees in the camp suffered malaria, diarrhoea and other maladies.

The area of fighting across the Tenasserim mountains, opposite Pu Muang, Huay Sut and Bong Htee camps, lies to the south of the \$1 billion Total-Unocal natural gas pipeline. The pipeline will span Burma and source of energy for Thailand. Thai companies are also among the bidders to build a deep water port at Tavoy, which will be linked to Thailand by roads which run through or near these camps. The major forcible repatriation occurred at Bong Htee, where an old World War II supply road once linked Tavoy to Kanchanaburi. Eyewitnesses have reported that bulldozers have been flattening a broad swathe on the Burmese side following the Sloc troops advance, while on the Thai side, the road is being upgraded and is due to be completed soon. Refugee camps in the area would have inconvenienced the opening of this region to trade, hence one arguable reason for the forcible repatriation.

The Karen people who have come to stay in the border camps have done so as a last resort. In rural Burma, villages are burned, relocated and transformed into battlefields daily. Interviews with refugees illustrate a desolate picture of life in Burma: villagers are subject to forced labour or portering, arbitrary taxation, land confiscation, used as human minesweepers, and other violations of economic, social and cultural rights. Stories of ill-treatment, rapes, torture and murders are numerous.

As Burma and Thailand increase their economic links, Thailand's support for the refugees correspondingly decreases. The international community, through its vocal condemnation, stopped large numbers of Karen people from being forcibly repatriated into war zones and areas facing imminent attack. The international, diplomatic and NGO communities are urged to continue to be vociferous in their condemnation of this gross violation of obligatory international law principles. The offensive is slowing now that the rainy season is on its way, but this does not guarantee a safe return to Burma for the refugees. Continued pressure will need to be exerted on Thailand to continue its long tradition of humanitarian assistance and allowing those in danger to seek refuge in their country and not to repatriate any refugees until a genuine lasting political solution and peace is established in Burma. The international community also needs to continue its humanitarian assistance to the border area to help those in need of immediate food, medicine and supplies, and to work to improve the security of the refugees by moving the camps further inside Thailand.

The refugees plight is not an internal matter as Chettha would like to define it. Refugees cross borders and are therefore by definition and action an international issue. The voices of the refugees should be heeded: *"We need for the leaders of all other countries to come and help resolve the conflict between Karens and Burmans. We need to be able to return to our country and stay there in love and peace. We need mutual understanding and for our leaders to be able to return in freedom. As refugees we need for the Thai police to cease arresting and detaining us, and to stop seeking money from us. We need the UN to recognize us as refugees, and to bring to an end the time of the Sloc military government. We want to govern ourselves with unity and cooperation, for a land of peace."*



V.J.C.

THE FLESH TRADE: A CYCLE OF TRAFFICKING & EXPLOITATION

The World Conference on Human Rights adopted paragraph 18 of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993), which states:

"The human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community."

Gender-based violence and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation, including those resulting from cultural prejudice and international trafficking, are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person, and must be eliminated.."

In 1993, Burma passed a child law, but it does not prohibit acts of torture or rape against children. Nor does it ban child prostitution or the use of children for pornography. "In some cases girls are trafficked into Thailand, through border checkpoints administered by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Slorc), where they become bonded labourers working in slave-like conditions. If these girls are returned to Burma by the Thai immigration authorities, they face arrest under Burma's immigration laws for having left the country illegally. Given the lack of due process and corruption within the judiciary, they do not receive a fair trial." (Human Rights Watch Asia report January 1997).

There are at least 50,000 Burmese girls and women working in Thailand as prostitutes at any one time. With the fear of HIV infection, brothels have increased the turnover of girls, and clients desire increasingly younger girls, who clients believe are less likely to be infected. The reality is that for young girls, especially for virgins, the risk of HIV infection during sexual activity is greater than for older women, and many girls become infected immediately.

Most of the girls trafficked into Thailand are from poor rural families and are generally lured to leave Burma with promises of jobs in factories or as domestic workers. The girls travel to the border, accompanied by a relative or companion, and meet a Thai agent who pays the relative/companion between \$400 and \$800. From there the girls are taken to brothels and are effectively in debt to the brothel owner, having to work until they pay off not only the price their companion had been given, but also the agent's cut and interest. Kaew, an ethnic Shan 18-year old sex worker from Thachilek, said she first thought she was going to work in a restaurant in Thailand, "But the agent took me to a hotel and raped me. Later I was sold to a brothel owner." Most brothel owners pay authorities to look the other way, but from time to time even those who pay are raided by different police or other officials. Some owners pay a monthly fee to officials and take responsibility for the girls when they are arrested. In many establishments, however, the girls must pay back the owner the amount given on top of the debt already owing.

The girls are generally prevented from leaving the brothels. If they do manage to escape, they are often too ashamed to return home, and many are HIV positive. Most of the girls had never heard of AIDS or condoms before entering Thailand and language barriers exacerbate the problem. They are left with few real choices, and many of them re-enter the profession. More brothels are opening in Burma by women who have

returned. In Rangoon last November and December, Burmese police arrested 65 sex workers and five pimps in a crackdown on prostitution.

Burmese sex workers who are "rescued" in police raids are detained by Thai authorities on immigration charges and are held for months in detention centres where they face further abuse. From there they are deported to Burma, where again they face arrest under immigration laws for having left the country illegally and risk being held at Rangoon's infamous Insein prison. Burma has taken some steps to work in coordination with Thai authorities to prevent the trafficking of women and children. One measure is to deny single women visas to neighbouring countries, particularly Thailand and Singapore, which is discriminatory and ineffective as most cross without interference at various "friendly" border points. Burma has signed but is yet to ratify, the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others.

A recent issue of *Today*, a tourist magazine published by the Burmese tourism office, features the story "Land of Virgins and Restful Night". According to the story "Myanmar has long been known as the Land of Pagodas, but very few persons, if any, seem to be aware that it has also been a land of Virgins". The story continues to extol the virtues of Burmese virtues, concluding that most visitors "go away highly satisfied with their visit to the Land of Pagodas and – now that you know – of Virgins, too...May they retain [their virginity] as long as they can or should!"

Burma ratified the UN's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) in 1991, but according to Human Rights Watch Asia's January 1997 report highlighting widespread atrocities against children, Burma's accession should be seen as an "empty gesture to improve its image abroad".

The Asian Women Human Rights Council (AWHRC) sent a three member team to investigate rights violations and document sex trafficking last February on the Thai/Burmese border in the Mae Sot district of northern Thailand. The members interviewed many of the Karen women who cited being harassed by Thai authorities, living in constant fear of the Burmese military and many being forced into prostitution to provide for their families. Their report says that "illegal migrant work and large-scale trafficking has flourished... (as the) Burmese refugees are impoverished, powerless and unprotected...with their communities and families deprived of food, shelter, livelihood, peace and security, more and more Karen and Burmese women fall prey to trafficking."

The team was unable to visit the brothels, but from interviews with sex workers, they were told that at least five women have died of AIDS related complications in Mae Sot district alone since the beginning of this year. The rate of HIV infection among Burmese sex workers was approximately three times higher than among sex workers in general in Thailand. A major reason for this is their powerlessness to demand safe sex. The team found that many sex workers in brothels along the border were as young as 13 and are kept in appalling conditions. The flesh trade has gone underground due to a new Thai law that punishes minors in prostitution. This effectively places the girls beyond the reach of health workers and protective measures. However, the Labour

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WHY THE RUSH ... FOR ASEAN MEMBERSHIP?

"The rapid increase of business ventures involving organizations with links to ASEAN governments would imply that our leaders seem to have mistaken "constructive" for "construction"." – Debbie Stothard, Coordinator, ALTSEAN-Burma at the 53rd session of the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Foreign ministers of the Association of South-east Asian nations (Asean) will meet informally in Kuala Lumpur on May 31, to decide whether Cambodia, Laos and Burma will be admitted to the grouping at a formal meeting in July. The seven members, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam, will put forward their decisions and the reasons behind them at the meeting. Last July, Asean agreed to admit the three countries simultaneously, but if one of the countries is rejected, the other two will not be able to join.

Western countries have criticised Asean for wanting to reach their goal of including all ten Southeast Asian countries into the forum by ignoring the volatile situation in Burma and Cambodia, but Asean has supported the policy of "constructive engagement" arguing that by politically and economically engaging Burma, the country would begin opening up and in doing so, reach acceptable international business and political standards. However, Amnesty International's latest report on Burma called 1996 the worst year for human rights in almost a decade, and the latest offensive by the Burmese Army against the Karen National Union (KNU), has resulted in a massive influx of refugees along the Thai/Burma border. This contradicts pronouncements by Asean ministers that Burma is making concrete moves toward democracy as a result of their policy of constructive engagement. It is obvious that the objectives of "constructive engagement" are failing, so why are Asean members bent on admitting the grouping in July? What is the rush....

The Alternative Asean Declaration on Burma opposes Asean membership for the Slorc on the grounds that: the Slorc is not the legitimate government of Burma; Asean membership would provide the Slorc with a de facto licence to continue its attacks on the peoples of Burma; and the Slorc's activities are a direct contradiction to Asean's aims and objectives. This declaration was finalised last October and has been endorsed by 277 organisations and individuals from existing Asean member states, including 16 current and several formal members of Parliament. The Declaration also calls upon the member governments and the international community to

discard the policy of "constructive engagement" (which in practice is appeasement).

One of the surviving founding fathers of Asean, Thanat Khoman, urged a thorough weighing of the pros and cons of expanding the grouping before rushing to accept new members. He said weighty domestic problems means the prospective member would not be able to financially and administratively discharge their membership obligations. "It would seem wise to delay their entry, for their own sake as well as that of the organisation, which will always be ready to welcome them a little while later."

Foreign ministers of Asean members usually defend their position, saying "We do not consider what goes on inside another country".

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The Asean charter makes reference to the well-being of the people in the region, as well as the matter of regional stability. Regional stability is dependent on political stability, which itself is based on justice and respect for human rights.

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What Asean is actually doing in continuing to engage the Slorc is to meddle in the internal affairs of Burma, by giving legitimacy to the unelected regime. The Asean charter makes reference to the well-being of the people in the region, as well as the matter of regional stability. Regional stability is dependent on political stability, which itself is based on justice and respect for human rights. Asean should be urging Slorc to instigate a tripartite dialogue between the Slorc, the NLD, and the ethnic nationalities. Insead, Asean has failed to act when its influence is at its greatest.

According to government statistics that ran from 1988 through the end of Feb 1997, Burma had approved a total of \$6.03 billion worth of direct foreign investment, some \$2 billion of which has been invested over the last year. Much of the money is coming from manufac-

turing, real-estate, hotel and tourism sectors based in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and other neighbouring countries. The junta is counting on admission to Asean to lower import tariffs and attract further lucrative foreign investment and joint venture projects. The current engagement of Asean members' governments and companies illustrates that considerable money is invested in Burma and hence with the junta.

Asean would be wise to listen to Thanat Khoman's advice as Asean's current approach has attracted international and domestic criticism, will attract more if membership is granted, and damage Asean relations. If Burma is admitted as a member, Burmese officials as part of the Asean delegation, will not be able to enter the EU due to visa restrictions and sanctions introduced last year. An unlikely consensus from all current members will be necessary for Burma's entry into Asean.

Asean has defended its actions, deflecting the criticism as an East-West difference, through statements such as those made by Singapore's foreign minister, Mr Shanmugam Jayaumar, at the February Asean-EU meeting held in Singapore, that according to the "Asian way" the bride is expected to adjust to the groom after marriage. Apart from showing that the main interest in admitting Burma is the dowry, the statement, according to Ms Stothard, is "both offensive to Asian women and misleading - it is doubtful that Slorc sees itself as the stereotypical 'blushing bride'." Lets hope Asean's foreign ministers have conducted comprehensive fact-finding missions in Burma and vote with humanity on May 31, to at least delay Burma's entry by setting basic conditions for its future entry – the most important being to hold tripartite discussions to ensure peace and harmony in Burma and the region.



V.J.C.

MANUFACTURING DISSENT: RELIGIOUS TENSION AS A TOOL FOR REPRESSION

In tightly controlled Burma, protests, especially highly confrontational protests, rarely occur. When people take to the streets to voice their concerns, they risk detentions, interrogation and the possibility of violent suppression. The act of protesting in Burma symbolizes, to a certain degree, that the popular consciousness has been pushed beyond the confines of fear; people would rather risk their lives than continue to live under unsatisfactory circumstances.

When confirmed reports of protesting monks and anti-Muslim riots seep out of Burma, as they did this past March, they indicate that segments of Burma's population have reached a breaking point. In an atmosphere of state propaganda and limited information, there is no short supply of explanations behind the violence which, at a distance, appears to be directed almost entirely against Muslims. However, a closer look suggests that the Burmese government manipulated a volatile social situation to divert dissent from more sensitive issues and crack down on liberal minded Buddhist monks.

On March 18, the international press briefly reported that Buddhist monks, after hearing a rumor that a group of Muslim men had raped a Buddhist girl, initiated anti-Muslim riots in Mandalay. In the ensuing days, Buddhist monks in Rangoon, Sittwe, Bassein, Moulmein, Shwebo, Thazi, Amarapura, Sagaing and Prome joined the protests which involved destruction of Muslim property on multiple occasions. Slorc officials first refused to comment on the events, then supported the rape claim, and finally stated that most of the unrest had been caused by "anti-government groups [who] are very much desperate to create instability in the country wherever and whenever possible." For the most part, reports about the religious unrest in Burma indicated that Muslims were victims of religious conflict perpetrated by Buddhist monks.

However, a closer look at the protests and subsequent crackdowns reveals a series human rights violations also inflicted against Buddhists. Three monks died of bullet wounds they received when security forces opened fire on protestors for the first time since 1990 – an action whose significance the international press largely failed to grasp. Security forces throughout Burma arrested and disrobed more than 100 monks as officials tightened restric-

tions on monasteries. In Mandalay, the 39th Light Infantry Battalion surrounded the monasteries at Sagaing Hill, effectively preventing monks from gathering in public. A Buddhist celebration scheduled to involve 1,000 monks at Kaba Aye Pagoda in Rangoon was restricted to only 100 government-selected monks, and the Slorc canceled the monks' annual examinations.

Throughout contemporary Burmese history, Buddhist monks have remained loyal to their faith and, as a result, have been thrust into the political realm. Monks actively protested against repression during the British rule and throughout Ne Win's dictatorship. During the 1988 demonstrations, outspoken monks helped influence popular dissent. Because monks are highly revered in Burmese society, the Slorc cannot publicly and groundlessly suppress them in the same way as the junta would suppress other opposition groups.

According to the All Burma Young Monks' Union, on March 13, Burma's unofficial Human Rights Day, a group of monks in Mandalay planned a demonstration to commemorate the lives of sixteen other monks who had died in police custody. Unfortunately, news of the protest reached the police who responded by arresting several monk leaders. The monks decided to delay the demonstration.

A report distributed by the Buddhist Relief Mission recalled that three days later, U Pinnyawatha Sayadaw, a senior monk who takes care of Mahamuni, a highly revered Buddha image, discovered that a priceless ruby of considerable spiritual significance had been stolen from the image. An investigation indicated that Slorc officials had stolen the gem along with "large amounts of gold from Pakhan Pagoda, Anyathihataw Pagoda and a temple in Pakkoku. That afternoon, anti-Muslim riots broke out on the corner of 35th and 84th Streets in Mandalay. The next morning, March 17, the Venerable U

Pinnyawatha Sayadaw was arrested."

Several different sources indicated that Slorc agents and USDA members donned traditional Buddhist robes, masqueraded as monks and proceeded to damage mosques and other Muslim properties in an effort to divert attention from the thefts.

In Mandalay, monks began demonstrating for the release of U Pinnyawatha Sayadaw and an immediate investigation into the previously mentioned thefts. At this time, the 39th Light Infantry Battalion was mobilized to prevent the monks who live at Sagaing Hill from joining the demonstrations.

Meanwhile, statements in the March 28 issue of *The Nation* indicated that in Rangoon, some monks associated Muslims with president Suharto's recent visit to Burma. During the diplomatic meeting, the Slorc gave Suharto a red-carpet reception and, in return, Suharto expressed full confidence in Burma's future Asean membership. Some monks involved in the Rangoon riots claimed that insulting Muslims was their only option for expressing frustration with the Slorc.

In an article for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Bertil Lintner explained some other frustrations that contributed to the level of unrest. Mandalay natives have expressed concern over the influx of foreigners, mainly Chinese holding Burmese identity cards, who have taken over segments of the economy. weather, a poor economy, inflation and an increasing foreign presence were wearing on people's nerves, and the government realized this. Anti-Chinese or anti-Slorc protests posed



a threat to the junta which relies on a close relationship with China for munitions and a degree of political backing.

By manipulating popular dissent to focus against Muslims, the Burmese government created a situation that benefitted it in at least five ways. Firstly, the social disdain and violence directed against Muslims weakened the Muslim opposition. Secondly, Burmese security forces could use the anti-Muslim unrest to justify restricting movements of and arresting human rights and democracy activists and other "destructive elements" within the Buddhist sangha. Thirdly, by fomenting anti-Muslim sentiments and then allowing people to act against Muslims, the regime averted a potentially worse scenario in which frustrated people might have focused their anger on Chinese immigrants or the Slorc. Fourthly, by singling out a minority group as a scapegoat the Slorc attempted to unify the majority around a hate-based sense of nationalism – a tactic often used by dictatorships. And fifthly, the chaos and misinformation surrounding the anti-Muslim protests served to divide the opposition, taking them one step further away from a unified campaign.

C.E.K

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Slorc's Offensive Against Buddhist Monks by Buddhist Relief Mission 970406
ABYMU Statement 970331
Nowhere to Go: A Report on the 1997 Slorc Offensive Against Duplaya District (KNU Sixth Brigade) by Images Asia and BurmaNet 970400

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Ministry's Public Welfare Department recently called on police to aim their prostitution crackdowns at procurers, brothel operators and customers instead of underage sex workers.

It came as no surprise that the All Burma Democratic Students' Front's (ABDSF) report, *Pleading Not Guilty in Insein* released in April found that widespread human rights abuses inflicted by the military government fall hardest on women. The report said the army frequently drafts women as forced porters in its campaigns against the country's various rebel groups, and they are made to serve as human mine-sweepers. They are routinely gang-raped by the soldiers at night, who also routinely rape women whose villages are razed in the fighting. Such horror stories have been documented for a long time and most of the report's allegations are backed by previous reports by human-rights groups.

The Burmese government scoffs at the allegations, and a Slorc official called them "ridiculous"; yet the testimonies of the women on the border cannot and should not be ignored. Images Asia documented the following reported rape cases from interviewing the latest influx of refugees along the border: two mentally retarded Karen women were gang raped for 5 days in Pho Hsee Mu villages by Slorc soldiers. Eventually the soldiers ordered one of the victims to cross the border and call the villagers back but she told the girls she met, "You are very beautiful. Don't go back. I'm not beautiful and they raped me, so it is even more dangerous for you"; Karen nurses were raped and killed near Azin; three married Karen women, one of whom was pregnant, who were heading back from Thailand to their village were raped by Slorc soldiers along the road; and many second-hand accounts of rapes and killings concerning Mon and Karen women. One woman said that everyone left their village because they were afraid of being raped: "We have heard that the Slorc soldiers rape and kill people."

What can or should be done to protect women and girls from trafficking and other forms of exploitation? HRW/A suggested that steps need to be taken to prevent the trafficking of girls and women in Thailand and elsewhere. "The Slorc should negotiate with Thailand to establish a system for monitoring the trafficking, which mainly takes place at official cross-border checkpoints, and investigate and prosecute the traffickers to the fullest extent of the law. Burmese girls who return or are returned, should not be detained under immigration or other laws. The government should take steps to ensure that they are fully rehabilitated and reintegrated when they return and conduct educational programs to discourage parents and children from being involved with trafficking agents." (report p.3). The international community should monitor the security of refugees along the Thai/Burma border and provide adequate protection from sexual exploitation. Further, Slorc should be encouraged to sign, ratify and honour all United Nations protocols. Most importantly, it is not safe for the refugees to return or be forcibly repatriated after the immediate fighting stops, until a genuine political settlement has been reached that guarantees fundamental human rights standards.

V.J.C.

The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"A panopoly of laws continues to be used to criminalise and punish the very exercise of civil and political rights. There are still frequent allegations of the arbitrary killings of civilians and insurgents by members of the armed forces." – **Judge Rajsoomer Lallah** addressing the UN Commission on Human Rights.

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"Even a superficial glance at Mr Lallah's reports reveal that they are essentially political statements, in the guise of legal arguments, intended to exert unwarranted pressure to influence the outcome of events that must necessarily be decided by the inhabitants of my country and not by outsiders." – **Ambassador U Aye's** response to Lallah's report at the UNCHR.

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"Stay clear of making disturbances and agitations that may lead to disintegration of national unity and a state of unrest" – **Committee for Observing Discipline** during Maha Thingyan.

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"Burmese leaders are on notice that, unless the clouds of repression are lifted, they will face investment sanctions under US law" – **Madeline Albright**, US Secretary of State.

"I was under house arrest because of my politics, so politics became my whole life. Most of the time, I spent thinking about politics...Once you're alone as a political prisoner, then politics is your whole existence." – **Aung San Suu Kyi** quoted in Whitney Stewart's biography titled *Fearless Voice of Burma*.

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"Gen Chettha said the government considers Karen refugees victims of fighting inside Burma and not victims of warfare which was the precondition for the presence of UNHCR" – **Bangkok Post** 970326

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"The real source, the real reason behind this [religious unrest], is I think social unrest. When there is communal strife anywhere it is due to social unrest. Social unrest is related to such factors as political dissatisfaction and economic problems." – **Aung San Suu Kyi**, in her video address to the UNCHR.

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"Such speculation was the 'wishful thinking' of all those who are opposed to the Burmese government" – **senior military official** on whether the mail bomb was connected with a power struggle among Slorc leaders.

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