

BURMA ISSUES

News, Analysis & Peoples' Stories

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"Perhaps if the government slaughters five million people."

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad's response when asked what would prevent Burma's admission into Asean.



Painting by Tin Aung Win

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

BURMA UNDER SIEGE

In Burma today, virtually every individual lives with the fear that their rights and dignity can, at any time, be seriously abused by the Burmese military. Neither religion, ethnicity, age, nor occupation is a guarantee that an individual might be spared the erratic demands of the military to use a human being for free labor or pleasure. These abuses, more than anything else, are driving a growing number of refugees into Thailand.

The following testimonies, collected by the Karen Department of Social Welfare, were taken from a group of Burmese military deserters and porters on the 29th and 30th of April this year. The interviewees included Burmese military soldiers, farmers, poor laborers, and even small businessmen. They paint a picture of Burma as a land under siege by a military which shows little respect for the people it demands to rule.

Maung Z. Win, a 22 year-old Burman Buddhist from Rangoon.

"In 1991, I was arrested and sentenced to seven years imprisonment for selling marijuana. After about four years I was taken, along with about 75 other prisoners, on a ship to Tavoy by Burmese military troops. From Tavoy we were trucked down to Mytta and sent to the front lines. I had to carry a large tin of rice for the soldiers.

"We had to walk a long way and my feet ached. I became weak and finally threw away my own bag and just carried the army's things. During one month of portering, I saw about 50 porters die before my own eyes. Some were killed by land mines, some got weak from lack of food, and others fell into steep ravines along the way.

"During the time I was a porter, I was beaten when I could not carry the load. Sometimes the soldiers would punch me or stamp on me with their boots. I saw other porters hit with rifle butts causing them to bleed. The unit we were forced to porter for was an artillery unit of the Burmese army."

Wei Lin Oo, a 21 year-old Burmese soldier from Tavoy.

"I joined the army in 1994 and finished military training in 1995. After the training I had to go to Heho LIB (Light Infantry Battalion) No. 117 camp, and was attached to an artillery unit there.

"I gained battle experience fighting at Khun Sa's area at Ho Maing. In November, 1996, I left Heho and was moved to Bassein where I

very little bit of rice to eat while the soldiers ate as much as they wanted. We also had to carry the pigs and chickens that the soldiers took away from the villagers. However, we were never allowed to eat any of the meat.

"Since the beginning of being a porter, I had to carry heavy loads without proper food to eat, so I became very weak. Some soldiers were

very rude to us and kicked us or poked us with their rifle barrels. Some soldiers were very tired and when they could not carry their things, their own officers would kick and beat them. When they could no longer bear it, they would be left behind in the jungle. I have also seen porters left in the jungle."

Zaw Min Thin, 19 year-old soldier from Rangoon.

"I come from a very poor family and was only able to study to grade two in a monastery school. I finally joined the army in 1993 and was assigned to No. 4 Company of

LIB 18 artillery unit. In the platoon there were eight people but I and two other junior privates were used just like slaves for the others. We had to cook rice, fetch fire wood and carry water for the others. At meal times we had to eat after the others were finished, so we only got leftover food.

"During the offensive against the Kaung Taung Thon Lon, many soldiers got sick and weak. From our company more than five died from sickness, and another killed himself. My friend also killed himself as he could not bear the conditions any more. With my own eyes I saw three soldiers left behind when they got sick."

U Hla Myint, 57 year-old Burman farmer from Nyaung Gone village.

"I am a farmer. In the summer of 1991 there was no farm work available so I went into the Yoma forest to cut wood. I was arrested there and sent to Tharrawaddy jail for ten years. In 1995 about 300 prisoners were transferred to Mergui jail. There we had to do hard labor at Maw Tone, Kyian Chaung and Tha Bot lake. My work was to find stones for road-building. During the last four months I had been at Tha

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Two escaped porters, both former convicts from Rangoon Prison (note that they are still wearing their white prison longyi). They say they were both beaten often by the soldiers until they escaped. [Photo:Burma Initiatives]

had to attend military training for air, sea, and ground operations. After this I was sent to Tavoy. There I was attached to Battalion 52. I had to carry a 0.5 caliber machine gun. We advanced to the Thai border in April when it was raining heavily. I got cold and sick. My own rifle was a MAI with 240 bullets.

"I had to carry heavy loads over a long distance and my shoulders became bruised. We were not allowed to take a rest. If we tried to rest, we were kicked and beaten. When I could not carry my things any longer I took the chance and hid by the side of the road. I threw away the gun and ran away on April 15."

U Min Naing, a 43 year-old Burman Buddhist from Tavoy.

"I am very poor so I work as a daily laborer to help my family survive. I have four children, the eldest is 18 and is in school. When the Burmese military demanded porters from our village, the village headman selected me, so I had to leave my poor family behind without anyone to care for them.

"I was taken to Kwee Waw Wah where the Slorc was fighting with the Karen soldiers. I had to carry food supplies through the jungle to the Slorc soldiers. We were given only a

VICTIMS

Extra-judicial execution is one of the most serious forms of human rights abuse that an authoritarian state can perpetrate against its people. Hundreds if not thousands of incidents of summary and arbitrary killings have been documented in Burma over the years. Many more have never been recorded on paper. Human rights reporting normally relates only the facts of a case: the victim, the perpetrator, the event itself, witnesses – and rightly so, for evidence is what turns allegation into proof.

Nevertheless, each execution is also a case of profound human suffering, suffering which is not easily communicated in depositions and eyewitness accounts. The emotional impact of a brutal murder is seldom given much attention in human rights documentation, yet for those who know the victim it is this emotional legacy, far more than the minutiae of the incident, that endures. It is troubling to consider how many of Burma's people have been exposed to the brutality of the civil war and the death of loved ones.

In hopes of communicating even a modest fraction of this impact, I want to share my own experience with summary execution. I do it with some hesitation, for my suffering is distant and small compared to the family and closer friends, and thousands of others who could tell stories much more poignant than mine. Perhaps the reader can glimpse in my brief ruminations a collective grieving for all the victims who ever were – a class-action catharsis.

Last year a soldier of the Burma army shot my friend dead. He was caught hiding in the jungle in northern Karen state, detained, searched and interrogated. Later, he was taken to a clearing, made to kneel with his hands tied behind his back, and shot once in the back of the head. He was unarmed, and though a member of an opposition group, at the time of his arrest was merely traveling near his home village checking on conditions of the people there. Before long, news of his death reached the Thai-Burma border.

Of course, death brings grief, no matter what the cause. But the difference, I think, between losing someone to disease or old age or combat or an accident and losing one to murder is that the pure injustice of the act sears the mind, never letting it rest. My imagination can not stop trying to picture the event, gruesome though it certainly was. How close was the nozzle of the gun that fired that single shot – one foot, five feet, or was it so close that it rustled the black hair on the back of his head?

In pensive moments I find myself focusing

more on the executioner, whom I don't know, than on the friend I lost. I can't help but try to visualize the soldier whose finger pulled the trigger. Was he a battle-seasoned veteran or a fresh young recruit in a baggy uniform? Was it his decision or was he following an order from above? Will this toughen him, making it easier next time, or it will it haunt him with shame and regret and for the rest of his life? Will he even remember? Did his hands tremble?

Where were his parents, his wife, his children at that precise moment when he pulled the trigger? What would they think and feel had they been witnesses? What will he write in his next letter home? Is this act of brutality a shameful secret which he must bury in the passing years and hope to forget? A decade from now will he have nightmares depicting the last trace of the life he extinguished? Will this make him a cruel man, morose, disturbed? Or will he reintegrate into civilian life and rationalize his war crimes? Will he be a more religious man than before, seeking atonement, or will he resign himself to the irreversible fate of his actions?

This curiosity is overwhelming. Why do I want to know so much? I don't have the slightest feeling of hatred towards him, this nameless, faceless executioner; I don't want revenge. The pity I feel for him is, I believe, not tinged with moral superiority but a (perhaps somewhat na-

ive) conviction that the perpetrator himself is a victim as well. There is not much solace in this cliché, there is only an unfamiliar tension between anger and forgiveness. I want to tell him how stupid it was for him to kill my friend and I want him to promise never to repeat the act and then go on in life a wiser, more humble man, more willing to do good and to never harm another living thing. I want him to understand what he did to us all on that day, to feel the same sorrow.

Is it the improbability of conventional justice in Burma's legal system, or is there a more self-gratifying motive which contents me with dreams of reconciliation rather than fantasies of retribution?

I'm not the first person ever to reflect on death and violence, and I know others who have reacted with much greater eloquence and poetic force than I have here. But if it has never yet been said about the violence ripping apart rural Burma, then let me be the first. And let me invite all others to add their own reflections about the impact this violence has on individuals, families and communities, on the nation and on the human race. And let it help us finally bring the violence to an end, for the sake of the victims in all of us.



C.A.C.

PO LO REPORTS

In the following reports, all references to names and specific villages have been changed or removed in order to protect the identity of witnesses and victims.

Torture and Extrajudicial Execution

On February 8, *Tatmadaw* troops were patrolling the perimeter of a small village and they reached the river, where there are about four field-side huts. The soldiers saw 'Maung' (about 50 years old) and his companions speaking together. The soldiers captured 'Maung' and his companions, accused them of being KNU spies, and executed them on the same day. Before they executed them they tortured them in a variety of ways. As for 'Maung', the soldiers stuffed a length of longyi material (2 - 3 feet) into his mouth and rammed it down with a weaving rod (about 2 feet long) until it was all forced in, so that 'Maung' died in excruciating pain. (It took 3 men to be able to pull it out again.) The soldiers also destroyed his paddy barn, which contained about 200 na (2000 gal.) of grain. They also destroyed the entire hut.

On April 6, *Tatmadaw* soldiers entered a village in search of KNU Administrator 'Tin'. The *Tatmadaw* soldiers wanted Administrator 'Tin' in order to have him identify the locations of secret KNU arms caches. The *Tatmadaw* soldiers didn't know what 'Tin' looks like, so they captured 25 villagers and abused them. The *Tatmadaw* soldiers asked one villager after the next – "Are you 'Tin'?" The villagers answered that they don't know him. The *Tatmadaw* soldiers asked them again and again and tortured them. They made a jagged hole in the middle of a rice winnowing tray and rammed it over the head and onto the neck of one villager at a time, and then spun it around, so that blood was flowing from all the villagers' necks. The soldiers tortured the villagers like this for two days, and gave them very little food or water (just spoonfuls). On April 8, the soldiers went and captured a villager from another village, then covered his face and brought him to identify 'Tin' from amongst the 25 villagers by listening to their voices (this villager also had no idea

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ISOLATING AUNG SAN SUU KYI

In May, the Slorc arrested and/or detained 316 members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), including 50 members of parliament, in an attempt to thwart a two-day meeting which was to be held at Aung San Suu Kyi's home. Even as international condemnation flowed from governments and human rights groups, the foreign ministers of Asean decided to press ahead with the scheduled entry of Cambodia, Laos and Burma as full members to the grouping in July this year. The decision satisfies the aim of enfolded all 10 countries in the Southeast Asian region before the grouping's 30th anniversary celebration in Kuala Lumpur this December. Instead of a cause for celebration, Asean's decision should be considered cause for concern: increased concern for the security of Aung San Suu Kyi, members/supporters of the NLD, and for the 48 million people in Burma who have no trust of, and fear, the ruling military regime. The entry of Burma into Asean is seen by Suu Kyi as a move which will strengthen the junta and prevent democratic change. Members of the NLD received long prison terms last year on the same day Asean granted Burma observer status. Suu Kyi has said that if the Slorc "are made a member of Asean, it will be as though they have been given carte blanche... [they will be] even more obdurate and oppressive than ever."

Asean's decision defies US-led pressure from the west against granting early membership to Burma. The controversy focused on the deteriorating human rights situation in Burma. The US President Bill Clinton had just issued an executive order prohibiting new investment in Burma because of the human rights violations, citing the continued and increasing oppression on Suu Kyi and members of the NLD as the main reason. Asean has again used its 'constructive engagement' line regarding Burma to counter western pressure for economic isolation of Burma. However, Asean's policy will be put to the test as Burma is being subjected to a probationary period. During this probationary period, if Asean fails to bring about positive changes in Burma, its constructive engagement policy can well and truly be slandered as it will be proven to be defunct. Unfortunately, the Burmese people will pay the highest price for Asean's failure. As Human Rights Watch/Asia's executive director Sidney Jones said, "The most recent arrests make a mockery of any claim by Burma's neighbors and allies that economic engagement will bring improvements in human rights."

The NLD won a landslide victory in the May 27, 1990 general election, but the ruling military junta, which overthrew an earlier dictatorship in 1988 and killed thousands of anti-government, pro-democracy protesters, pre-

vented the NLD from taking power. Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest in 1989 and was released 6 years later in July, 1995. However, her freedom is still severely curtailed as the regime continues to reject her calls for a political dialogue, prevents her from holding congresses, no longer allows her to speak in public, and cuts her phone lines regularly.

Last October, the regime began erecting roadblocks around Suu Kyi's home to prevent her from addressing the thousands of supporters who turn out each weekend to hear her democracy speeches. Heavily armed riot police began to arrest anyone who tried to approach her compound, and her motorcade was attacked in November by a mob whose members said they were paid by the government. She is prevented from leaving her compound regularly, and military intelligence harasses and intimidates those seeking to meet her. NLD members have been given long prison sentences on fabricated charges, while being denied access to attorneys or contact with their families. NLD members have been forced to resign under threats of prison terms or loss of jobs and housing, and then given prison terms anyway. In at least 32 instances, members of parliament have been pressured by the government to renounce their electoral mandates. Some members have now fled the country. Hundreds of university students have been jailed since student protests against government education policies and police tactics flared last December, effectively decapitating the student movement; at the same time, members of the NLD were blamed and arrested for inciting the students. A fierce offensive was launched in February against the Karen National Union (the KNU), a party that, until its repression in 1995, played a key role in opposing the military regime.

These tactics illustrate a change in the Slorc's strategy. Previously, the Slorc tried total dominance and annihilation, placing Suu Kyi under house arrest and capturing all major resistance bases along the border. Now, the strategy adopted is one of cut-and-clear (see Burma Issues Sept. 1996). Suu Kyi has been 'released', but all her support is being cut off and she is finding herself increasingly isolated. Despite the severe restrictions facing her, Suu Kyi vowed to press on with the struggle for democracy, and at Buddhist New Year's celebration held at her house in April this year, she urged supporters to summon the "courage and strength" to achieve their aims. The gathering aimed to honor political prisoners in Burma, most of whom are NLD members. Amnesty International has said that nearly 2,000 people were arrested for political reasons in central Burma last year, with many re-

ceiving long prison terms.

The latest crackdown illustrates the Slorc's unwillingness to compromise. NLD officials said at least 60 senior party members from the provinces were arrested by military authorities as they headed to Rangoon to attend the party meeting. The Slorc said the planned NLD assembly at Suu Kyi's home was a move to create "unnecessary problems" and forced the government "to take strong measures against them so that the anti-government propaganda can be played in their favor." Amnesty International's response highlights the Slorc's illogical actions and paranoid behavior, stating: "It is outrageous that these pro-democracy activists were arrested simply for planning to attend a meeting."

The latest crackdown against Suu Kyi's supporters has ended as those detained are beginning to be released after Asean's decision to admit Burma was announced. However, the next few months will be telling as to the attitude the Slorc decides to adopt following their acceptance into Asean. Before the decision was announced, R. Jeffrey Smith, Washington Post staff writer, commented that, "There appears to be to be a consensus among Western diplomats here [in Rangoon] that as bad as Suu Kyi's personal situation is now, it may become even more grim" if Burma is granted membership to Asean - "If they get in, they will likely lock her up again," a senior diplomat said. If so, Asean, and the countries which continue to support the existence of the regime either politically or economically, should be willing to accept responsibility for the consequences.

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CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT WORKS!

Asean's policy of 'constructive engagement' has many critics among human rights and democracy activists. They generally argue that 'engaging' the Slorc diplomatically and economically lends support to an illegitimate government, and gives the military junta no motivation to change its policies. The problem is not the impotence of Asean's constructive engagement but rather that very few people outside the Slorc understand *who's* policy it is. Most people, including the Asean ministers themselves, seem have the misconception that Asean members have instituted a constructive engagement policy with the Slorc, when in reality the Slorc has been rigorously following their own policy of true constructive engagement for several years now.

Initiating a policy of constructive engagement involves one group courteously engaging another group that has differing views or practices. After productive contact has been made, a group wishing to constructively engage the other begins a series of discussions. Over time, the discussions evolve into agreements which eventually result in a mutual friendship free of hindering views. Both groups still retain differences, but these differences are no longer critical since one group (the recipient of constructive engagement) has been convinced to change its ideology or end its offensive practices.

In 1994, Slorc officials began to realize that with a few changes, Asean could be used as a buffer against foreign criticism, and at the same time provide a source of foreign currency via the encouragement of investments. The Slorc and Asean officials began holding discussions with each other. The junta initially focused its attention on Indonesia, whose military government appeared the most sympathetic to authoritarian rule. Through discussion, the Slorc emphasized the need for Asean countries to maintain independence of the Asean organization, stressing the importance of non-interference in "internal affairs" and the dangers of neo-colonialism. Indonesia seemed receptive. To further entice Asean, the Slorc offered several "carrots" including cheap natural resources, a ready supply of manual labor and lax investment regulations. Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam responded favorably and added the concept of "Asian values" to Asean's policies. Even though Thai-Burma relations have a history of conflict, Thailand, under economic strain and pressed by an increasing appetite for energy, began to listen to the Slorc.

In 1996, Asean gave Burma observer status in the Asean Regional Forum (ARF). Western nations applied more political pressure on

Burma, and Asean responded by defending Burma's policy of constructive engagement, claiming it was an Asean attempt to reform the Slorc. Malaysia and Indonesia pushed harder for Burma to become an Asean member. At the same time, the Slorc managed to convince the Thai government to reverse its policies regarding the Burmese Karén along the border, and to ignore the Burmese army when they cross into Thailand to cause mayhem in border areas, even while the Thai military loses face with the Thai people. At the Thai-Burma 'Friendship Bridge,' Slorc is dangling the carrot of investment in an attempt to convince Thailand to fund the entire bridge, while at the same time allowing the Burmese generals to redraw the border in Burma's favor. Thailand is responding well, continuing to avoid conflict with the Slorc and gradually giving way to the Slorc's demands; the Slorc's constructive engagement continues.

Now that Asean has decided to welcome Burma's membership, the Slorc's constructive

engagement policy appears to have reached its final destination – provided the goal was Asean membership. In a decision reminiscent of the numerological policies of Burmese dictator Ne Win, Asean seems convinced that its thirtieth year is magical and, in spite of economic and political evidence to the contrary, this thirtieth year is best time for it to include all of the region's ten countries. Slorc has persuaded the Asean tigers to take vows with the most impoverished and politically unstable countries in Southeast Asia. If, however, the Slorc has grander plans such as Asean domination, then the constructive engagement will proceed unabated. In the first week of June, Burma was also invited to join Bistec, another regional grouping, which includes Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Perhaps joining Asean was only one segment of the Slorc's constructive engagement policy; if so, it remains to be seen what constructive engagement will accomplish for the Slorc in the future.



C.E.K.

Cont. from page 3, 'Po Lo Reports'

who 'Tin' is, let alone his accent, so it is unclear as to why the soldiers did this). This villager simply said that none of them were 'Tin', and so the *Tatmadaw* soldiers released the villagers.

During this incident, all together 6 people were executed and 25 villagers were tortured. When this report was made several days later, villagers were still suffering from severe pain as a result of the torture, especially internal pains which prevented them from eating or drinking much.

Rape and Extrajudicial Execution

In February, *Tatmadaw* soldiers came and established a base adjacent to a village as part of a program to set up checkpoints all along a road in the area. On February 20, a sergeant and two of his subordinates entered the village and, at about 10 p.m., entered the house of 'Ter', 45, and 'Nee', 35, and raped them. After the rapes, the soldiers threatened to kill the women that if they told anyone. At first the women didn't dare to do anything, but a day later 'Ter' went and told some other villagers what had happened. On February 22, the sergeant came and captured the women, took them out of the village and killed them. He then threatened the villagers that if they told others what happened then he would kill them all, so the villagers didn't dare to go and report what had happened, but stayed quietly in the village.

Arbitrary Confiscation of Property and Forced Relocation

On February 18, when the interviewee went to help construct the *Tatmadaw* military base at a nearby village he overheard an infantry commander say that they will fight the Thais soon, as they have now defeated the KNU.

On April 1, a *Tatmadaw* commander ordered the residents of two small villages (about 50 houses total) to relocate to a site about 700 yards from their respective villages and to construct a fence around the new site. The order stated that the two villages were to be moved because members of these villages are in contact with KNU. The villagers could not take things with them, and the *Tatmadaw* soldiers destroyed approximately all of the villagers' houses.



Source: 'Po Lo Reports 1', 970614.

TIGHT TIMES

Thirteen years of relative freedom for Burma's unofficial refugees sheltering in Thailand may be coming to an end. Impending martial law in the camps has created frightened confusion among residents. The refugees' right to a say in their own fate has never been recognized, and after more than a decade of dependence on aid, refugee camp communities have all but lost their capacity to act. Although people's inherent resourcefulness will help them find ways to adjust to the new restrictions announced this week, the net weight of thirteen years' stagnation has done nothing but blunt their collective capacity for creative response. The latest moves to reduce the refugees' scant freedoms compound the problems created by a history of apathy and unresolved despair.

Act I: Breaking the Norm

In January, Huay Kaloke and Huay Bone refugee camps were burned in a surprise attack by Slorc and DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army) troops, leaving more than 10,000 refugees homeless (see *Burma Issues*, February, 1997). In the wake of January's destruction, camp residents wondered if they had fallen off the Thai administrative map. Token security measures, consolidation and eventual reconstruction of the two ash-strewn sites at Huay Kaloke were all laboriously addressed with the Thai officials. In contrast, by the arrival of the June rains, the camps suddenly got more attention than residents had bargained for, in the form of official visits and increased media attention.

After three hot months in limbo under makeshift shelters, the refugees could finally set about reconstructing their former dwellings from materials both donated by external agencies and locally foraged. Life began to return to relative normalcy. The steady flow of new arrivals resumed from all parts of Burma's displaced society, most using the camp as a stepping-stone to finding exploitative jobs in Thailand. A slack Thai military presence consistently ignored unchanging threats from invaders across the border. A new perimeter fence going up around the camp aroused only a moderate degree of alarm.

Thus, orders delivered by Thai military and provincial officials on June 6 have been a rude

shock to the Huay Kaloke community. In a closed meeting with Karen camp leaders, the Thai officials began by reiterating that the camp residents are not refugees, but "temporarily displaced persons." They presented the new orders:

- The Thai military will begin to take an active role in administering the camp.
- Severe travel restrictions will be imposed on camp residents.



Last January, Huay Kaloke and Huay Bone refugee camps were burned in a surprise attack by Slorc and DKBA troops. [Photo: Brian McCartan]

- Burma nationals who are not camp residents and who do not have Thai documents (such as temporary worker permits) will be banned from entering the camp.
- Foreign nationals, other than those with registered NGOs approved to work in the camp, will be banned entering the camp.
- All deliveries of relief supplies to the camp community, including food and medicine, will be itemized and distributed in the camps by Thai military personnel.
- Private vehicles, televisions and mobile phones will be banned from the camp, and severe restrictions placed on the operation of shops and video halls.
- Thai military personnel on patrol throughout the camp will have broad search and seizure powers

During the meeting, the government representatives repeatedly deferred to "higher authorities," both indicating that more regulations may follow, and implying a new sense of direction for overall Thai policy. This is borne out by

corresponding actions at other camps and select border villages. What remains to be seen is the exact nature of this new program, and whether or not the authorities will have the capacity and conviction to go through with the policies they undertake.

ACT II: Big Cogs, Smaller Wheels

The fires burnt down more than the eye could see, yet also failed to destroy much of what had built up over time. Unjust power structures had emerged from the inferno apparently malleable, but instead these structures have been tempered and hardened.

How are people affected by so many years' physical and cultural isolation, and the strange bedfellows of economic exploitation in Thailand coupled with virtual dependence on foreign relief aid? Stateless, impoverished, nominally under the legal protection of the host country, the camps became social vacuums. This space mutated into the rented fiefdom of an authoritarian ruling class comprised of an imported elite of Karen nationalist

heavyweights, Thai landlords, and local Thai militias. Collectively, this powerful elite have dominated lives, with the ability to affect access to food and a roof, some freedom of movement, and physical security.

The initial shock of the fires generated unprecedented criticism of the camps' political structures. Previously untouchable norms of hierarchy became tenuous overnight. Anti-people administrators were openly challenged; dissatisfaction rumbled. This was new.

Thus threatened, the oligarchy schemed to maintain their grasp on the lucrative reins of control, making use of weight of threat and the occasional outrageous lie. For example, when residents protested at rice donated for camp residents being openly transported to adjacent Thai military posts a camp administrator admonished – "Now the foreigners (NGO's) have agreed to feed them too – so shut up!" As usual, instead of making any attempt to engage the people, falsehood was employed merely to silence them.

Moneys demanded of residents by the spectrum of capitalists-that-be include:

- 50 Thai baht (25 baht = US\$1) house 'rent' per month (up 100% from last year); hundreds per shop
- 3-10 baht per distribution of rice rations (generally once monthly, paid upon collection of the ration)
- 10 baht per ineffectual 'travel pass', in reality a receipt for moneys extorted rather than a recognized travel document
- Miscellaneous other charges, such as 'fines' for failure to attend monthly work duties.

Little wonder one camp resident quipped "Huay Kaloke (Kaloke Creek) begets 'Shway' Kaloke (Golden Kaloke)."

So much oppression stymies people. They call on their leaders to act and hear only pathetic anthems: "It's not our country, we can't do anything." As someone recently remarked, "If it's all they can say then why are they the leaders... that has no meaning."

"We have no country, we can't do anything," can be heard often here. Given the pseudo-nationalist wheels that have been churning in this region since de-colonization, that statement helps to explain how it happens that so many people of Burma must face such tenuous conditions. Now it so happens that one such wheel, having long dominated thousands of lives, is rapidly being squeezed into historical oblivion. Yet those who have borne the greatest burden of this barren legacy must remain long after the wheel has ceased. Absurdly, the cogs will strain until the last.

N.P.T.

ECONOMICS

FUNDING FEAR: SALARIES

The military generals in Burma depend on the *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese army, to retain their control over the Burmese people. When the SLoC came to power, it decided to build the largest land army in Southeast Asia. Through rapid recruitment and forced conscription, the army has swelled from 175,000 (1988/89) to roughly 325,000 (1994/95) — well on the way to achieving the goal of 500,000 (which is a larger than the US army). The armed forces have also received a growing percentage (estimated as greater than 50% by the US Embassy in Rangoon) of Burma's national budget.

'Burma Under Siege,' cont. from page 2

Bot lake labor camp when one day the army came and took all the hard labor prisoners away to Tavoy. Once inside the IB 25 camp our shackles were removed.

"We were sent to Taung Thon Lon, to the camp of 509th Battalion. I had to carry two boxes of 0.5 caliber bullets. If I took a rest, they would swear at me. I am old, and for about ten days I was very weak and could hardly stand. There was not enough to eat.



Escaped Burman porter, age 14. [Photo: Burma Initiative]

"They sent me to 18th Battalion where I had to go along with the heavy gun unit. They gave me only one six-foot saw and three big pots to carry because I was old and weak. They accused me of only being interested in eating and not working. I wanted to run away but I

did not know the way. Along the way I saw many porters dead. They fell down along the road because they were weak and sick."

U Ngwe Tun, 43 year-old Burman tea shop owner from Rangoon.

"I am a trader and had a tea shop in Rangoon called the 'Tut Pee' tea shop. I went to Tavoy to buy cloth. One evening I went to a cafe and left around 11 in the evening. As I left some soldiers and a policeman came and arrested me. I had all my documents and my ID card.

They took away all my money and then said they would release me after a short while.

"At midnight they took me to an open area which I later saw was a playground. Many people had been gathered into the area, and later we were taken off to be porters on the front line."

Peace in Burma must deal with much more than trying to end the exchange of gunfire between the Burmese military and the various insurgent groups throughout the country. Peace requires a guarantee to the people of Burma that they will not be subjected to continued abuse by the military or any other group which takes over power. It is only a guarantee of this kind which will convince the 120,000 refugees in Thailand that it is indeed safe for them to return home.

N. Chan

C.E.K.

The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"I believe that Burma, once admitted to Asean, will probably realize there are certain norms that have to be met for a better world reflection of Asean." – *Philippines Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon.*

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"The Asean leaders' decision yesterday was a triumph of evil over humanity. There is a Thai saying that one rotten fish can spoil the whole basket." – *Editorial from The Nation, Thailand.*

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"Even a playboy can become a good husband after his marriage, with the family's help. That's the Asian way." – *Thai Foreign Minister Prachuab hoping that Asean can reform Slorc.*

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"We have now lost our international honor and become just one of the gang of thuggish states that yet pretend their authoritarianism is but a necessary step to what the Philippines already has: democracy." – *Editorial in the Manila Standard on Burma's admission into Asean.*

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"While nation-building tasks are making good progress with the involvement of the *Tatmadaw*, the government and the people, vigilance is essential because of perpetration of destructive acts by the maggots within our country in collusion with their foreign cohorts." – *The state-run New Light of Myanmar regarding Burma's upcoming Asean membership.*

"Last year was the worst year for human rights since the government annulled the elections. Now the Slorc seems determined to eliminate the party altogether." – *Amnesty International media release condemning the new round of mass arrests of NLD members traveling to Aung San Suu Kyi's house to celebrate the seventh anniversary of their May 27, 1990, election victory.*

• • •

"Thailand has tried very hard to be good and has extended friendship towards Burma, but Rangoon seems not to respond positively to the friendship extended. I think there are many reason behind such a response which I don not want to explain." – *Thai Army Commander in Chief Chettha Thanajaro regarding relations with neighboring Burma.*

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"There is [an] attempt to make it a political issue." – *An officer of the Royal Thai Army complaining because Thai villagers were protesting against the Burmese army's dredging of the Moei River. The dredging work will redefine the border, and, in the process, about 100 Thais will lose land to Burma.*

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"However, there is concern that the entry of the three countries, which are economically inferior and politically unstable, will fetter Asean." – *Daily Japanese newspaper, in response to Burma, Cambodia and Laos joining Asean.*

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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