BURMA ISSUES

News, Analysis & Peoples' Stories

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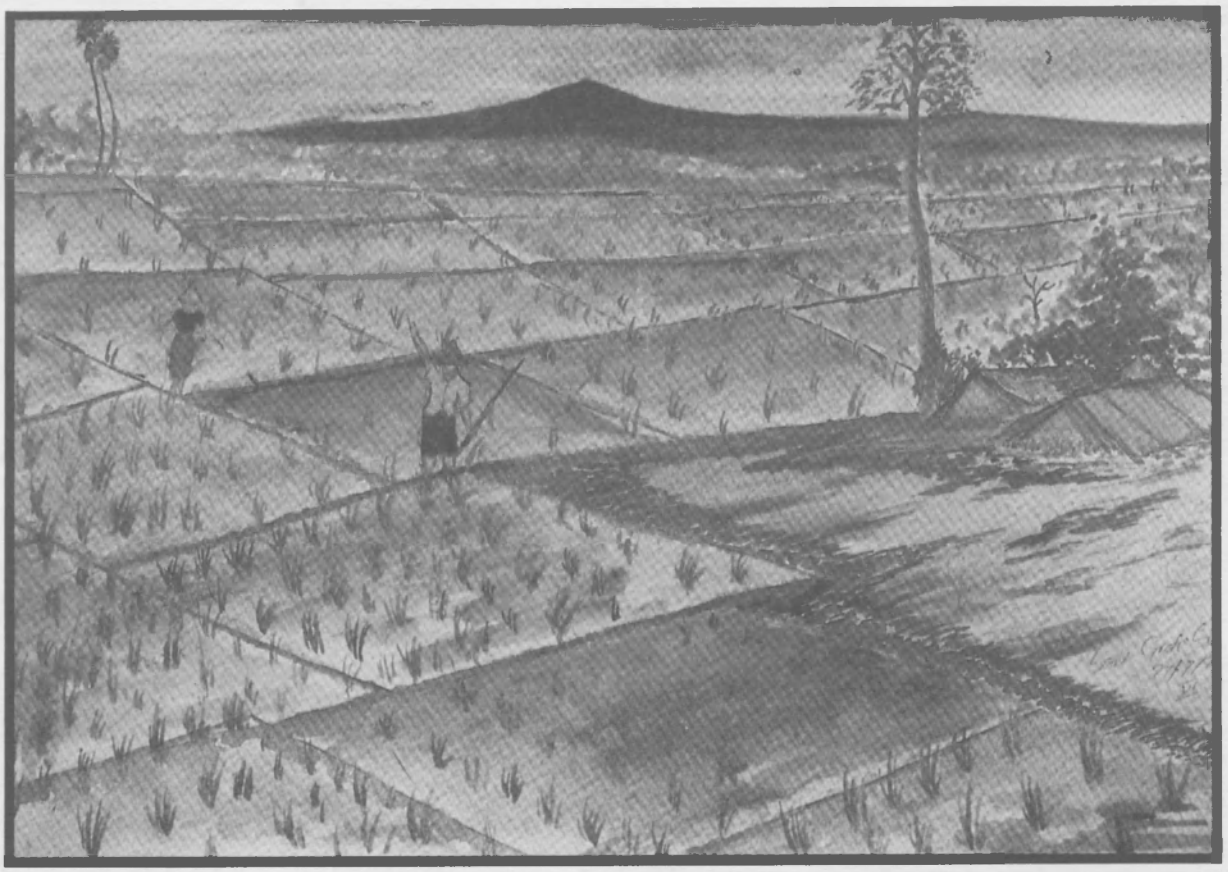
"The solution to the problems of Myanmar must be attained essentially amongst the people of that country." *A spokesman for U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan*



"The Paddy Field" by Saw Grate Soe , age 12, of Huay Kaloke 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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SEEEKING JUSTICE

Having been embroiled in bitter civil conflict for more than fifty years, Burma may face a difficult task defining the term "justice" once the armed hostilities truly come to an end. Experience and vision provide the foundation for how we understand and define terms such as "justice," and the experiences of the people of Burma under military oppression and civil war are vast and varied. One would hope that once the guns are silent, a smooth process for clearing up the past and moving on to the future would emerge automatically. However, events in countries around the world in transition from periods of harsh conflict would suggest that serious preparations need to be started long before the conflicts end in order to work toward a justice which is fully uniting, and which provides all members of the society the hope, confidence and feeling of security necessary to bring about a lasting and true peace.

There will be some in the society who will argue that, once the hostilities cease and political reformation becomes possible, the past should simply be forgotten and all energy focused on building a new future. If this is actually allowed to happen the terrible suffering which those who have been most victimized by the past fifty years of conflict will never be fully recognized and rectified. It will be as if the knife of enslavement which was thrust into their hearts so long ago will not only remain there, but will be twisted to inflict even further pain and agony. Justice for the most oppressed of the society must be at the heart of any process towards a true and lasting peace, and thus the discussion of what will constitute true justice must be at the forefront of any strategic planning for the future and must deeply involve the most oppressed sector of the nation.

Others will tend to define justice in legal terms. The law stipulates what is considered just and unjust in the society, and also levies various punishments on the individuals who break those laws. Following a conflict, the actions of individuals who perpetrated violence against others are judged against these laws. If found guilty, the proper punishments are meted out and justice is served. The assumption is that once these guilty individuals have been removed from the society, or at least from effective activity within the society, justice has been achieved. The weakness in this approach is that injustice lies not so much within individuals, but within attitudes and prejudices which can permeate all strata of the society and make it possible for some individuals to carry out acts of terrible violence against others. Therefore, removing individuals who have wrecked havoc on the lives of innocent villagers, does not necessarily guarantee those villagers that the attitudes which created their hell have been neutralized. The fear of a recurrence of injustice, thus, remains deep within their consciousness. True justice can not exist under these conditions.

Another definition of justice, which too often goes unnoticed, is that reflected in the words of an internally displaced farmer who said, "I just want to go back home with my family and live in my village peacefully." While simple in terminology, this definition of justice is probably the most complex and demanding one to consider. "I want to go home," is not merely a statement about physical movement from a jungle hideout back to a traditional village site. The statement implies the need to recognize and effectively address the root issues which drove the farmer and his family into the jungle in the first place. These issues are not properly dealt with simply by adhering to national or international legal procedures. Most often they require significant and serious social change by the society as a whole.

What the peasant farmer and his family require is a guarantee that the terrible suffering and terror they have experienced will not be repeated against them nor visited upon their children and grandchildren in the future. The imprisonment and/or execution of military leaders responsible for the past suffering is not a guarantee to them that new military leaders with the same destructive mentality will not rise up again soon. Their faith in leadership has been seriously damaged, and while laws can and must lay the foundation for protection of justice in the future, the victims of oppression have little reason to believe that those laws will actually be effective. They need something much more than court cases or the enactment of new laws, or even the establishment of a democratic system to believe that they can finally go home with their family and live in their village peacefully.

Justice for this peasant farmer, and millions of others like him, requires that the society look at the root causes of the long conflict and have the courage to carry out the significant social changes needed to rid the country of those deep-lying roots. It should be remembered that the present period of civil conflict started more than fifty years ago, during a time when Burma was emerging from a period of colonization and entering its first democratic era. The roots of the conflict, therefore, lie not with the present militarization per se, but with attitudes and prejudices within the society which led groups into rebellion because they believed that they could never be equal partners in the emerging independent nation, and which gave some corrupt military leaders the space they needed to establish their strangle hold over the entire country.

For the peasant family to feel a sense of true justice requires that the society clearly articulate these roots of injustice within the society and take responsibility for remedying them. It is not easy. It is a process which continues to be a struggle even in countries like the USA and Canada which have no dictatorship and which have sufficient laws for effective legal actions to protect justice. A true recognition of these roots of injustice implies that not only will the society recognize and take responsibility for them, but that new economic, cultural and political structures which need to be created as the nation moves into a postwar era

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SANCTIONS OR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT: THE DILEMMA OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY PART 1

In direct defiance of the striking down of Massachusetts' selective purchasing "Burma law" by a U.S. District Court on November 4th, the Los Angeles city council passed a similar law on December 14. L.A. became the latest locality to pass legislation restricting business with Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The town of Vincent became the third Australian city to join the ranks of local governments unwilling to support the totalitarian regime.

Sanctions remain the choice form of political intervention within the international arena. Immediately after the 1988 government crackdown the international community withdrew all but a small amount of humanitarian aid from Burma. After the military regime refused to hand over power to the parliament elected in 1990, the western world has slowly worked to put a greater distance between themselves and the junta. Aung San Suu Kyi, as the spokesperson for the party who won an 85% majority in that election, has consistently called for economic sanctions, influencing policy decisions such as the April 1997 ban on new U.S. investment in Burma.

Sanction proponents, however, are now facing difficult questions from all corners. The SPDC acted swiftly in jailing large numbers of National League for Democracy (NLD) members after Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party called for the convening of the Pyi Thu Hlutaw or 'People's Parliament'. The subsequent, and apparently successful, campaign pressuring members to leave the NLD has left the outside world wondering at the fate of Burma's main opposition party and the future of democracy in the country. Business interests, policy makers, activist groups and some of the Burmese people, pointing at the futility of western isolationist policy, are questioning sanctions.

One of the fundamental questions that lies at the heart of the sanctions debate in Burma is: what is the best way to influence political change. "For years outsiders portrayed the troubles of my country as a morality play: good against evil, with no shade of gray in between – a simplistic picture, but one that the world believes. The response of the West has been equally simplistic: It wages a moral crusade against evil, using such 'magic wands' as sanctions and boycotts," wrote former Aung San Suu Kyi aide, Ma Thanegi in the Far Eastern Economic Review. "Ma Suu could have changed out lives dramatically. With her influence and prestige, she could have asked major aid donors such as the United States and Japan for help. She could have struck up constructive dialogue with the government and laid the groundwork for a sustainable democracy."[1]

These thoughts are echoed by the business community. Robert Morris of Premier Oil PLC, who owns shares in the Yetagun natural gas project, argued that, "International corporations bring the technology and the value systems of their home country. We import into developing countries state-of-the-art communications technology along with the micro-culture of the democratic and free society we come from."[2]

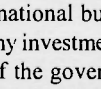
Sanctions remain the choice form of political intervention within the international arena.

Investment, undoubtedly brings a higher level of development. The question that needs to be asked is: who exactly benefits. The case of the construction of the Yadana gas pipeline, cast some significant doubts that the grassroots are receiving the benefits of outside investment. The ongoing civil war between the Burma Army and ethnic minorities along the borders with Thailand, Bangladesh and India pretty much isolate these people 'as enemies of the state' from the benefits of any government associated project. In Yadana project the Karen people, whose land the pipeline was built through, actively suffered for the investment made by French Total and U.S. owned Unocal. The pipeline project was preceded by an army offensive to clear the entire fourth district of the Karen State, still held by insurgents. People were taken off their land and moved into fenced relocation sites. Others are living in the jungle, continually fleeing the army. The International Labor Organization and the U.S. Department of Labor have both sited the use of forced labor in the project. However, it is not just investment projects that take place in insurgent areas that lead to these human rights abuses. In a county where the ongoing civil war is a reality of life for many of the ethnic people and where a large percentage of the national budget goes into military spending, any investment that puts money in the coffers of the government, indirectly supports the ongoing military offensives against the ethnic minority people of Burma.

The companies currently in Burma would be hard pressed to come up with evidence that their presence has contributed to a greater degree of freedom and democracy in the country. Current investors in Burma are so tightly tied to government enterprises that they are largely unaware of the many human rights abuses taking place under their noses. One former protestor argued that foreign investors bring fax machines and e-mail, important tools in a country where communications is closely monitored. The small number of Burma nationals who work in these companies, and have the opportunity to use this equipment, have some strong reasons not to become politically active. Those with both the skills and the luck to get corporate jobs are a tiny minority, and receive salaries several times that of a government bureaucrat – one of the other choice jobs in the country. In a country where political activism comes with the price of a jail sentence or worse and where people are going hungry, these individuals have enough to live comfortably and support their families.

The argument that outside investment can bring about positive change, rests largely on two assumptions. The ability to influence the political and economic system requires access to the citizenry as well as the government. If the microcosm of democracy that companies bring to Burma is only experienced by those whose power is threatened by a democratic system, an ideological shift isn't very likely. Lack of access to the people also brings the inability to monitor the effects of investment. Without a clear view of potential human rights violations indirectly caused by the investment, the investor is unable to act in accordance with their principles, voicing their concerns to those in power. The second assumption is that companies investing have political change on their agenda. It is fairly clear that investment currently in the country is only helping the select few at the top of the system. It is the responsibility of the international community to understand clearly what it is supporting and withdraw support from that which it cannot morally condone.

E. Miller



1 Far Eastern Economic Review, Feb 1998

2 The Irrawaddy; Apr 15, 1998

FARMING IN THE RED: RURAL CONDITIONS IN BURMA

Last May, just before planting his rainy season rice crop, a farmer, "U Nyunt," was interviewed about the conditions for him and other farmers in Tenasserim Division, one of the most important rice-growing areas in Burma. Conditions are plainly bad, and for many they have been worsening for years. The story is the same all over the country: small farmers, on land that has supported families for generations, are increasingly unable to make an adequate living from growing rice. Unlike many cases of human rights abuse, however, it's difficult to identify a single culprit or a perpetrator behind the problem. As everywhere in Burma, it is a combination of factors, particularly economic realities which are out of the grasp of the present government and which, over time, are eroding the livelihood of millions of farmers.

"U NYUNT"

Why have you come to the [Thai-Burma] border?

I've come to sell my cattle.

Did you ever come previously?

I've come every year for the last five years. The reason is that I've had no money to grow paddy, so every year I've come to sell some cattle to get money.①→

> "I've had no money to grow paddy"

How many cattle have you come to sell this time? Will the sale price be enough to get money to grow paddy?

I came to sell cows, and they don't get so much money. Three cows. For the three I got 10,000 Thai baht. If you change that to kyat it's about 80,000.

I have six acres of fields at my village.②→ That land doesn't yield too much paddy. If you use fertilizer then one acre can yield 60-70 baskets. If you don't use it then it's only 30-40.③→ Last year, for six acres I got a total of 350 baskets. I used 14 bags of fertilizer. One bag of fertilizer was 3,000 kyat, so for 6 acres I spent 42,000 kyat.

I hired a ploughing machine at the rate of 3,000

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The rising cost of farming

One of the critical themes in U Nyunt's statement, and a central issue for farmers just about everywhere is the availability of credit and affordable farming inputs. In Burma, both are increasingly hard to come by.

As seasonal changes in liquidity affect every farmer to some extent, borrowing and lending is an often indispensable part of rural life. In Southeast Asia, fortunes follow the cycles of the rains – farmers typically eat better and have more cash following the main harvest at the end of the rainy season (around November), and generally have the least cash and the least food right before the harvest. Planting and harvesting periods require labor, irrigation, and other inputs – costs which generally come at times when farmers also have less money to pay for them. Cash flow is a fundamental concern that intersects with nearly all other issues for farmers, and these are numerous in Burma.

The annotations provided below are intended to provide background on the pressures bearing down not just on U Nyunt's community, but on most of Burma's farmers. However, even if a problem's cause could be clearly identified and described, its effects are felt differently by everyone. U Nyunt's own situation can be seen as typical only in that his problems are complex and interrelated, and how he is able to respond to them is determines his future survival as a farmer.

① Cultivation costs

According to government statistics, almost 44% of all landholding farmers in Burma have other sources of income (GOB, 1993) – and U Nyunt is clearly one of them. Many farms are too small to turn a profit so farmers must find other income cover the costs of farming. Trading livestock is U Nyunt's way to raise the money he needs to cover cultivation costs. Many other farmers work part of the year as loggers, traders, miners or day laborers to save enough cash to cover their planting or harvesting expenses. Thousands of the Burmese nationals who work illegally in factories and on plantations on the Thai-Burma border are likewise laboring to support farms in Burma. The cash that many send or carry home from Thailand quite literally enables their families to plant the next year's rice.

② Relative wealth

One of the reasons that U Nyunt is still managing to make it as a farmer, despite taxes, fees, and rising prices, is that by local standards at least, he's not desperately poor. First of all, U Nyunt's farm, at six acres, despite the fact that he describes it as poor land, it's larger than the national average landholding of less than two acres. U Nyunt also has enough money to invest in assets like cattle, and apparently enough cash to transport them to a place where they're likely to sell for the best price. His money gives him a certain amount of bargaining power and flexibility that many who are poorer cannot afford.

③ Fertilizer

Burma's economic crisis has meant that even farmers with money often can't get the inputs they need. There is a nationwide shortage of chemical fertilizer, which represents a serious issue for farmers. Those who can't get or can't afford enough fertilizer are faced with significantly lower yields: according to U Nyunt's own estimates, not using fertilizer would reduce his harvest by about half. Government officials have acknowledged it as a national problem: "This [average] low yield per acre... was due to the fact that farmers in Myanmar in comparison with those of other countries used less fertilizers...." (NLM, 23 Jan 1998) It certainly does not intend to use less; the government puts significant effort into distributing fertilizers to farmers. But, as one farmer complained: "They [administrative officials] draw up registers and promise to provide one bag of discounted fertilizer per acre of farmland, but until now [the start of the planting] they've given nothing." (BI, June 1997)

Why does it not deliver? It may disappear into the black market via widespread corruption within Burma's local and middle-level bureaucracy (see BI, "Bureaucracy Days," Feb 1998). Bad timing and bad management can have the same results: "The government distributes fertilizer when people don't need it so people don't go to get it. When people need it they don't give it. People also can't afford to buy it.... Because of that, when we need it it's unaffordable, and so we no longer use fertilizer and so also the paddy is no longer good." (BI, 14 Aug 1997)

Ultimately, corruption and ineptitude only exacerbates what is a problem of economics. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, in a recent unofficial report pointed out: "In 1997/98 one of the factors for the decrease in paddy production was insufficient utilization of area fertilizer.... To make matters worse, the shortfall of paddy production for three successive years means Burma cannot export significant volumes of rice and so was deprived of hard currency to import inputs." (USDA, 1998) In other words, the government is facing the same problem as many farmers – it just doesn't have enough cash to purchase fertilizer when they need it.

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kyat per acre. Alternatively, if you can't give money, you have to pay [the machine owner] 10 baskets of paddy for each acre [after the harvest]. ④➔

You also have to give money to hire people to transplant seedlings and harvest [work which must be done quickly and labor intensively], so for my six acres I had 80-100,000 kyat total expenses. So the amount that I got by selling my three cows now will be completely used for this years harvest expenses.

How much paddy do you sell to the government?

For our village, it's different from other villages, because the paddy yield is low, so we only sell 6 to 8 baskets per acre. For my 6 acres I sell 48 baskets.⑤➔

How much money does MAPT [Myanma Agricultural Produce Trading] pay per basket?

Last year, 190 kyat per basket. At first, we had heard that they would pay real market value, but we only got 190 kyat. At that time, the market price was 350-400 kyat per basket.

This year, have you ploughed yet?

We started in mid-May, and at the end of May we planted the seedlings. When I return, I'll transplant the seedlings.

Will you get support from the government?

In our area, farmers with more than three acres are given [compulsory] support at the rate of 1,000 kyat per acre. So for my six acres, I get 6,000 kyat. That commits me to selling them the paddy quota.

This year did the government also loan money?

Last year in early May, the [state-run] "Agricultural Corporation" gave loans, but this year we haven't seen them yet.⑥➔

Where do you have to go to give the quota?

About 10 miles away from our village, at a village paddy storage facility. For people with carts and bullocks, it's no problem, but for people without, they have to rent these from others for a lot of money. For the trip of 10 miles, the rent is two baskets of paddy.⑦➔

Please explain about the general situation for farmers in your village.

Traditionally, in the monsoon we worked paddy, and in the summer worked on gardens. There is no way to get a lot of money. The vil-

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④ Cash vs. Credit

For farmers who are short on cash, a certain portion of the inputs for any kind of crop can be gotten locally on credit. Labor and the use of draft animals and equipment, in particular, may be paid for in baskets of paddy, after the harvest.

Though lenders may require payment according to a certain percentage of the total crop, in U Nyunt's area the price seems to be fixed, 10 baskets per acre. This may represent a pessimistic bit of risk-control on the part of the lenders: by fixing prices, they assure themselves of a certain return even if the farmer's harvest is bad.

Credit of this kind can particularly costly for farmers if it is repaid in paddy rather than cash because a bad crop, a jump in inflation or other problems easily push the effective interest rate of the loan much higher. Being able to pay immediately in cash is however always the cheaper way to do things. For example, because U Nyunt was able to pay in cash, last year he avoided paying an extra 3,000 kyat in interest on his ploughing fees.

⑤ Paddy quotas

The notorious paddy quota system requires all farmers to sell a number of baskets per harvest to the government at government-set prices. The paddy quota is in effect a nationwide tax on farmers, the goal of which is to supply the government with cheap rice to supply military and civil servants. (It has been described in several recent BI articles, most recently "Rice Reforms?" July 1998.)

The government provides farmers with some cash assistance to cover cultivation costs, but in many cases any benefits are eliminated by the fact that support is linked directly to Burma's paddy quota tax. As one economic analysist explained, "To justify the compulsory delivery system [paddy quota system], the state supplies agricultural inputs at subsidized prices [usually fertilizer] and agricultural credit at low interest rates" (Soe & Fisher, 1990). The link between government support and the paddy quota system is quite explicit to U Nyunt.

While a small loan like the one U Nyunt receives may be better than no loan at all, the strings attached to this support tend to obscure any benefit. Farmers in effect "repay" the government for support received in paddy at harvest time, so that actual cost to farmers is thus dependent on a complex range of economic variables: changing prices, the difference between the yield and the quota, and the always steep rate of inflation.

⑥ Government loans

Burma's government in the 1950s created a state-run farmer's bank, now called the Myanmar Agricultural and Rural Development Bank (MARDB). Established, in the state's words, to enable "farmers to save their surplus money and establish their lives free of debts," (NLM, 3 Dec 1996), the bank is very simply, failing at its task. One problem, which U Nyunt and millions of other farmers have experienced is that administrative problems are preventing credit from reaching farmers on time.

But the main problem is that MARDB does not have enough cash to lend to everyone who needs credit. MARDB is constrained by basic economics – banks build assets by collecting savings from people, for which they pay interest, and lending that money out to others at slightly higher rate of interest. A bank's ability to lend is thus limited by its ability to attract savings. As one report pointed out, "The solution is NOT to criticize the government or central bank, for not putting enough money in the MARDB. There will never be enough money from these sources. The solution is to attract deposits." (Dapice, 15 Sep 1995). The government has been failing at this, despite the fact that it has established incentives to save, including offering loans that are contingent on the amount of an individual's savings. According to state sources, only 13.15% of farmers (1.5 million out of 11.4 million) had savings in MARDB. These savings total 700 million kyat, meaning that the average deposit is only around 460 kyat (US$1.34). (GOB statistics to 21 Jun 1996. NLM, 28 Jun 1996.)

Probably the main reason that farmers are not saving is poverty. Other reasons for the low level of savings in Burma may include simple practicality. With 164 branches throughout the country, it seems unlikely that most rural Burmese have convenient access to a bank. Rural literacy levels, lack of familiarity with banking systems in general, bureaucracy, and general fear of authority are also likely factors.

However, one issue that the Burmese government has proven uniquely unable to resolve is trust. Several times since the military took power, but most recently in late 1987, the Burmese military has without warning demonetized certain banknotes. Making matters worse, there have never been comprehensive explanations for these demonetizations. Demonetizations in 1987 may have been intended to bankrupt Burma's black market; however thousands of ordinary people lost their savings overnight. (Smith, 1991) Despite government promises to the contrary, there is little to inspire confidence that it won't happen again. Thus, Burma's banks cannot provide a realistic credit solution for the majority of Burma's farmers.

⑦ Power affects prices

It's a hard reality everywhere that things are more expensive if you're poor. Being poor limits your choices – poor people are less likely to be able to wait around for better prices, or to be able to get out of town in search of a better seller's market. U Nyunt's village provides another example: the farmers too poor to own their own carts must still deliver their paddy without fail; they are thus forced to pay the asking price of the cart-owners, whatever it is.

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lage is in the forest, although there's a car to Tavoy one time per day. It's about 15 miles away and costs around 50 kyat per person, sometimes more, if the price of oil is up or people are few, 60-80 kyat.

From 1992 to the present, the Agricultural Corporation officials introduced a program to increase paddy yields.®↓ You have to crop exactly according to their method. For six years we have done like this. Our village has low quality soil, so unlike some other places, we don't get too much paddy. The villagers lose all of their money because after working the monsoon crop we have to do the summer crop after that. The summer crop is a total loss for the farmers, but if you don't do it, the government will take away your land. So, we lose our money, but nevertheless, we grow it.

To grow the summer crop, each year the stream must be dammed and an irrigation system built. The construction of this must be done by the villagers as "people's contributions," and we are instructed to go do this work for a month. [The work is temporary – simply blocking the stream with dirt and opening simple channels to fields. The following monsoon season, the works are destroyed by the rains and then must be repeated the following year.] This work must be done at the start of every summer, and so the farmers get no rest.

Interviewed by friends of BI, May 1998.

U Nyunt is one of the better-off farmers in Burma. He may be subject to many of the same economic pressures and government restrictions as most of Burma's farmers – but until now he's kept his land, and he's managed to farm it without accumulating serious debt. His situation is stable, but precarious – like most farmers, he is living from harvest to harvest unable to accumulate any kind of security net.

To a large extent, Burma's government is actually in worse shape economically. It is surviving from month to month, at the bottom of its currency reserves, and also in serious debt, and rumors persist that it may already be bankrupt. Of course, when a government goes bankrupt, it is the people, not the leaders who must do without. This year, the junta could not provide the food subsidies that are cornerstone of the salaries of thousands of soldiers and civil servants. Accompanying this news have been reports of increased desertions. The junta needs farmers like U Nyunt to keep getting better at producing rice, but is financially too weak to help them do it. Farmers and the junta share that concern: nobody can afford a bad harvest this year.

❖ **E. Zeamer**

® Green revolution

Through development initiatives, most in place since 1992, the junta has been pushing nationwide "green-revolution" style agricultural reforms designed to boost Burma's rice exports and bring in desperately needed cash. The military junta's special attention to agriculture is a reflection of its own fiscal interests. Participants in a recent government-sponsored symposium were apparently "... unanimous in their view that, another means of making up the [government] budget deficit was to carry out agricultural reforms and increase acreage under cultivation with effective utilization of fallow and virgin land." (NLM, 23 Jan 1998).

One of the most widespread "green revolution"-style plans in Burma forces farmers to grow a second irrigated crop during the dry season. This promises to increase their production, while costing farmers significantly in additional labor, irrigation fees and fertilizer. Green revolution technologies such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation systems, and high-yield variety (HYV) seeds, are also relatively expensive, require special training to use, and most important, cost foreign currency. If implemented successfully, the additional costs are eventually paid for out of the improved productivity of the farms. However, the green revolution also represents a significant gamble for poor farmers, who must usually go into debt to purchase expensive inputs. If, whether due to lack of skill, training, or simple bad luck, a farmer's income does not improve quickly enough, a family can easily succumb to its additional debts. Thus, badly designed "agricultural development" programs can easily end up making poor farmers poorer than ever before. Though he does not explain the details, this appears to be happening in U Nyunt's village: "The summer crop is a total loss for the farmers, but if you don't do it, the government will take away your land. So, we lose our money, but nevertheless, we grow it."

Burma Issues. Internal report, Rangoon Div., int. 14 Aug 1997.
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will be ones which the peasantry will easily understand, be able to participate in comfortable, and which will give them a sense of peace and security.

The terror rained down on the rural people of Burma cannot simply be forgotten and relegated to a silent past. The rapes, extrajudicial killings, constant forced relocations, forced labor and portering, hunger and deprivation of the past many decades remain etched too firmly and too clearly in the eyes of these peasants. Before they can go home with their families and live peacefully in their villages, they need assurance that the true causes of their suffering have been recognized by the society and the international community, and that serious steps are being taken to develop economic, political and social structures and values which will guarantee them the kind of life they most cherish - a life in which their dignity and their way of living is fully respected and protected from any kind of economic, social or political exploitation.

❖ *Max Ediger*

DECEMBER NEWS BRIEFS

Human Rights Day Message from Aung San Suu Kyi

In a prerecorded message to mark the 50th anniversary of the human rights declaration on December 10, Aung San Suu Kyi said the struggle for human rights in Burma, which was one of the original signatories when the declaration was adopted in December 1948, brought the people of Burma close to other peoples in the world who are striving for the recognition of their inherent, dignity and their inalienable right to life, liberty and security. She thanked those who have supported the people of Burma in times of adversity and expressed hope that the country may soon one day "be a source of strength and support for those in need of peace, justice and freedom."

The Nation, 5 Nov 1998

Seminar on National Solidarity

A seminar on National Solidarity, attended by representatives of 23 opposition groups, including ethnic nationalities, was held from 12th to 14th December 1998 at Thu-Mwe-Kalo, near the Thai-Burma border. The participants agreed unanimously that the contradiction between the military junta on one side and the oppressed people of all nationalities on the other, is the main contradiction in the society of Burma and that this is approaching a critical state. The representatives issued a statement saying they firmly believe that abolishing the military dictatorship and the building of future federal union can only be achieved through consolidated national strength. The seminar agreed to call upon all political parties and individuals, without discrimination, race, religion and political ideology, to join hands and work together. The representatives also supported the demand of the NLD to convene a people's parliament, "Pyi Thu Hlutaw."

Information Department Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS), 15 Dec 1998.

Selective Purchasing Legislation

Both the city of Los Angeles in the U.S. and the town of Vincent, Perth, Western Australia have passed selective purchasing policy against the government of Burma. On 14 Nov, 1998 Vincent becoming the third Australian Council to pass such legislation. The previous two were Marrickville, New South Wales and Moreland, Victoria. In its recommendation, the Council condemned the violent oppression of the rightful elected government of Burma, the system of oppression and the continuing denial of human rights in Burma by the military dictatorship. The " Council will not, in certain circumstances, purchase goods or services provided by those who conduct business in or with Burma, or who are willing to do so, until democracy has been restored and human rights violations have ceased."

In what is being labeled a huge victory for advocates of selective purchasing laws, the Los Angeles City Council voted on 14 December to adopt the Free Burma ordinance, which will prohibit the city from contracting with companies doing business with Burma. The victory for supporters of democracy in Burma comes at a time when selective purchasing agreement opponents looked to gain momentum after the National Foreign Trade Council, a corporate lobby group, sued the state of Massachusetts to force it to revoke its Burma Law. A federal judge ruled that the state's selective purchasing law targeting Burma violated the federal government's exclusive rule over foreign affairs. The decision is being appealed. "Without a doubt, this ordinance will rejuvenate advocates of selective purchasing in Massachusetts and across the country to use these laws as a tool to promote democracy abroad, " said Simon Billeness, Senior Analyst for Franklin Research and Development Corporation and an expert on socially responsible investing. " We have the country's two largest cities - New York and now Los Angeles - saying that we will not give contracts to companies that do business in Burma as long as the brutal junta is in charge." Twenty-two other U.S. cities and counties have selective purchasing laws that target Burma.

Free Burma Coalition, Australia
Burma Forum, Los Angeles, 15 Dec 1998

Japanese Support for Polio Vaccinations

The Japanese government is donating 61 million yen (458,646 U.S. dollars) worth of oral polio vaccine (OPV) to Burma for its fourth National Immunization Days (NIDs), happening both this month and on January 17, 1999. The donation will cover 260,000 vials for 2.6 million children in Burma, according to a press release of the Japanese Embassy in Rangoon. The Japanese government has donated just under 1 million dollars worth of OPV for the immunization program in Burma from 1995 up to the present. Japan also made a one time contribution of $225,563 worth of medical equipment to the country's National Health Laboratory in 1996. The Japanese government has also sent an expert in polio virology for who surveyed the situation between November 1997 and October of this year. The National Immunization Days program is implemented by the Burma's Health Ministry in cooperation with the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the Japanese government and NGOs.

Xinhua, 11 Dec 1998.

Dry Season Military Buildup

Rangoon is building up troops along the Thai-Burmese border in preparation for a dry season military campaign against ethnic insurgent groups according to Thai sources. Twenty to thirty battalions of Burmese troops had been stationed in Burmese territory along the border in Ratchaburi and Mae Hong Son provinces indicating strikes against ethnic armies are imminent. The Thai foreign ministry has asked that Rangoon stop the suppression, which has the potential of intruding into Thai territory. A ministry spokesman, Kobsak Chutikul, said that while the suppression of insurgency groups was an internal affair of Burma, Thailand would not allow any armed group into Thai territory. A Burmese envoy was asked to carry Thailand's concerns about the concentration of troops preparing to move against dissidents. Kobsak also indicated that Thailand would provide temporary shelter for those people fleeing the fighting.

Meanwhile, the Thai Immigration Bureau has urged the Labour and Social Welfare Ministry to update it's figures on the number of illegal workers in the country in preparation for a repatriation campaign. Thailand deported 300,000 of it's estimated 900,000 mostly Burmese illegal immigrants earlier this year.

The Nation 12 Dec 1998
Bangkok Post 12 Dec 1998

The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"No preconditions have been set on the release. After the discussions they came to the understanding that national security is more important than politics." *SPDC spokesman Hla Min denying that NLD members were forced to quit the party*

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"Cooperation between ethnic groups and the student movement and other pro-democracy groups is essential. Our experience on the border has taught us about ethnic realities in Burma, which the military regime has always distorted." *Burmese student leader at the "Rebuilding a Democratic Burma: Strategies for Sustainable Development" conference, Bellagio, Italy 23-27 March 1998*

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"The [U.N and World Bank offer of aid in return for opening dialogue with the NLD] will not bring about apocalyptic changes in Burma, nor will it break the political deadlock overnight." *Thailand's Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra speaking at a press conference at a seminar on "Engaging Burma in ASEAN" in Manila*

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"Myanmar has provided a valuable lesson, that you can't really change a country. Even though ASEAN tries to constructively engage Myanmar, the change has been too slow." *Kao Kim Hourn, director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace think tank.*

"Thailand is willing to work with all concerned parties to combat drug trafficking, but without undermining the national integrity of the state of Burma....This doesn't mean that we will give recognition or assistance to them in their internal struggle against the Rangoon government" *Kobsak Chutikul, Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman, on an offer by Shan and Karenni insurgent groups to cooperate with the Thai army in stemming the flow of illegal drugs into Thailand.*

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"Asean's policy of constructive engagement has failed to get things moving in a more democratic direction in Burma. The United States's consistent and high profile gesture to impose trade and aid sanctions on the military regime in Rangoon have had no obvious effect either. The European Union's concerted effort to apply its own pressure there has likewise not produced any desirable results. We have used a number of sticks which have apparently not worked. It's time to give out some carrots." *A participant in the Oct 12-23 informal meeting in England which proposed the possibility of aid to Burma for improvements in political and human rights*

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"I am here to express a feeling of being together with my friends. That is the feeling I am getting. Unity. Solidarity." *General Khin Nyunt, when asked if he was worried about widening splits in ASEAN between liberal nations and more isolated states such as his own during the recent summit in Hanoi.*

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