

BURMA ISSUES

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"Like many Burmese, I am tired of living in a fairy tale. 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 the world believes." – Pro-democracy activist and former political prisoner Ma Thanegi describing frustrations with the Western oversimplification of the situation in Burma.



Saw Htee Ku, 17 years old, Mawker Refugee Camp High School.

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

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PREDICTIONS: COMING CHANGES IN BURMA

"We believe that in the coming phase, our new constitution will be drafted and we will concentrate on our economy."

— SPDC spokesman Colonel Hla Min.

The end of military rule in Burma will take much longer than most people expect. Those who look at the various crises facing the military may find cause to feel somewhat optimistic about the future, but a broader analysis suggests that the regime is very carefully working out their strategy to keep opposition forces at bay, and will most probably be able to prolong their control over the country for some years to come. The only hope for a quick end to Burma's civil war is a carefully-orchestrated strategy by the NLD and ethnic groups to reawaken the sleeping vision and energies of a people exhausted by war, dictatorship, and suffering.

The Burmese military is facing both economic and political crises which threaten to weaken its hold over the country:

"ONE SERIOUS WEAKNESS OF THE OPPOSITION FORCES IS THAT THEY APPEAR TO HAVE NO LONG-TERM COMPREHENSIVE PLAN BOTH FOR THE STRUGGLE...

The economic crisis

Economic problems facing ASEAN countries are having a strong negative impact on the military regime, as they hurt Burma's ability to gain much needed income to continue to upgrade and expand its army — an army whose main purpose is to quell any dissent inside the country. As hope for increased investments from major trading partners such as Singapore and China dwindles, the Burmese military is putting more and more hope on the export of gas as a major source of new income. The gas pipeline being constructed from the Gulf of Martaban to Thailand is therefore a major priority for the military and they will continue to make certain that nothing threatens it. This will increase the hardships for the Karen and Mon people living in the Mergui/Tavoy area of Karen State through which the pipeline passes. If, for some reason, the construction of this pipeline is delayed, the military will face an even more desperate economic crisis.

The political crisis

The political crisis in Burma is now seen as less significant by the military when compared to the country's economic crisis. The positions of the NLD and the ethnic groups have been weakened considerably, and are not perceived by the military as an immediate threat. However, if the country's economic problems are not addressed effectively, they could have a serious negative impact on political stability. The military must move quickly if they are to prevent the economic crisis from also becoming a political crisis.

Thinking like the military

In order to predict how the military will handle the present situation, we need to look at it through their eyes. The military identifies five important "fronts" in the country which must constantly be controlled. These are: the ethnic front, social front, religious front, political front and economic front. The military currently has sufficient control over Burma's ethnic, social and religious fronts not to consider them much of a menace, such that they can be set aside for the time being.

The economic and political fronts, on the other hand, are presently of greatest concern to the military. Of these two, the economic front is most urgent and will take precedence. This means that the military might become more flexible on the political front in order to deflect attention away from

economic events. They will do this both to divert local opposition attention away from the economic situation and to weaken international criticism of their political and human rights policies.

The junta's tactics will probably grow out of a strategy to "say what the enemy wants to hear." An offer to initiate political dialogue with the NLD will not only sound hopeful to the NLD because it will bring them more solidly back into the political arena, but will also encourage the "wait and see" attitude of the international community. A political move to appease both national and international critics will give the generals much-needed breathing space to work on their economic crisis.

Another tactic will be a relaxing of restrictions on political movements inside the country. The military's hand-picked National Convention will complete a new constitution, paving the way to new elections. Political forces inside the country and the international community will both see such flexibility as a hopeful sign.

A further tactic will be to consider the repatriation of refugees back to Burma with at least some monitoring by UNHCR or an internationally respected group from Thailand. This

kind of repatriation will most likely be acceptable to the international community even if it does not guarantee total security for the repatriated refugees.

The military is counting on these tactics to draw the NLD away from a confrontational stance into the political arena which the military feels they can control. They are also counting on these tactics to encourage the international community to withdraw some of their criticism while they "wait and see" whether the situation will change. Both of these reactions will give the military the opportunity they need to start solving their economic crisis. Significant economic improvements would assure their position of power for some time to come. However, once they feel they have the economic crisis under control, they will again focus on their political front and could again severely clamp down on any political movements within the country and along its borders.

The crises of the ethnic groups and the NLD Opposition forces are also in crisis, a reality which plays well into the tactics of the military.

One serious weakness of the opposition forces is that they appear to have no long-term comprehensive plan both for the struggle and for the country, which might invite the support not only of the people of Burma, but also the international community. There also seems to be little effective co-ordination between the NLD and the ethnic groups to develop such a plan. This makes it easier for the military to divert attention of the people away from the root causes of the conflicts facing the country.

...AND FOR THE COUNTRY, WHICH MIGHT INVITE THE SUPPORT NOT ONLY OF THE PEOPLE OF BURMA, BUT ALSO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY."

At the same time, the military has tried to isolate opposition groups from the people, taking advantage of conflicts and weaknesses within the groups in order to create divisions. They have also kept up pressure on the opposition in an attempt to wear them down. For groups along the Thai-Burma border, the Burmese military has mustered the support of the Thai government and military, who in turn have increased their pressure on refugees living in Thailand and ethnic and opposition groups operating along the border. It should be noted that the weaker the position of the Karen National Union is, the more likely it is that the repatriation of refugees will take place with-

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JUSTICE, ETHNIC RIGHTS AND EQUALITY

The struggle of Burma's ethnic minority groups for self-determination and autonomy has lasted for five decades. However, the international community continues to focus on democracy as the solution to Burma's problems, seeing the civil war in Burma as largely an internal issue. The struggle of the Burma's ethnic minority groups could continue for many decades more unless ethnic issues are addressed as a vital concern.

The international community has put considerable pressure on the Burmese military government to restore democracy in the country. However, democratic elections and a democratic government without justice will not necessarily bring peace to Burma. The only change that will achieve real peace and justice is a system in which ethnic minority rights are respected.

In Burma, people of many cultures have been living side by side for centuries. Officially, Burma has more than 16 ethnic minority groups. In reality, Burma is far more diverse, distinguished by hundreds of different languages and dialects, and many traditions and beliefs. Historically, the Burmese rulers have discriminated against non-Burman minorities at almost every level. During colonial rule, ethnic differences were made worse by arbitrary and divergent policies toward various ethnic

groups. After Burma gained independence in 1947, the Burman majority filled top leadership positions in the civil service, armed forces and the state administration which had been previously held by ethnic minorities. In a few cases, ethnic minorities were hand-picked by the Burmese leadership to symbolize ethnic representation in the government. As a result, those few ethnic leaders acted only at the desire of the central government rather than as representatives of their own ethnic group.

Almost immediately following independence in 1947, civil war broke out. Within a few years, nearly every ethnic minority group was fighting against the new Burman-dominated, democratically elected government for autonomy and ethnic equality. Since 1994, about 17 ethnic groups have made cease-fire agreements with the government in an attempt to resolve the problem by political means, but the cease-fire agreements have not brought peace. Under a ceasefire, there is no power balance between the groups. The Burmese government has refused to give autonomy to ethnic groups, and accepts nothing less than total surrender.

Democracy as a term has many interpretations. For some, democracy is based on the rule of the majority. In the case of Burma, an interpretation of democracy based on majority rule will not guarantee ethnic groups their rights,

the Burmans are the majority, and all other groups the minority. That leaves the question of how different ethnic minority groups might benefit from democracy if it is practiced throughout Burma. Democracy may bring peace for the majority, but the minority will always suffer discrimination and persecution unless they also have power within the system to determine their own fate. Democracy alone cannot create peace and justice.

Democracy is as a practice understood and traditionally used by many Burmese in the context of their own communities. Without a democratic system which recognizes their needs, not just the needs of the majority, these local practices cannot improve the country. Ethnic minorities must be able to do more than just survive national oppression, subjugation, exploitation and domination by the Burman rulers.

Burma has always been a multi-ethnic country. It is crucial for the people of Burma to cooperate with each other within the ethnic struggle. If all Burmese people work together to end ethnic chauvinism and to respect ethnic minority rights, they can help to end the war against the ethnic minorities and bring freedom and justice to everyone in Burma.



Saw Wah Thoo

THE NEXT PHASE: BY THE PEOPLE & FOR THE PEOPLE?

If predictions, government promises come true, Burma may soon enter a new political and economic phase – beginning with the implementation of a new national constitution, expected to be completed in October this year. While the content of the document itself has not been made public, based on the statements from the National Convention¹ we can expect that the constitution will herald national elections, marking the formation of a new government for Burma. The question is, how will these elections be run under this new constitution, and how might they shape the way Burma is ruled?

The National Convention proposes a “presidential” system for Burma, making liberal use of terminology familiar in the U.S. system, including executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, “separation of powers”, an “electoral college”, and a two-chamber legislature. However, democratic systems aim to decentralize power by providing a real separation of political authority and giving real powers to the electorate or their elected representatives. Though both the National Convention and the SPDC (formerly SLORC) claim

that power will be decentralized, these claims are so far supported by only the vaguest statements and structural changes. When the Convention states that the three branches of government are to be “separated as much as possible and exert reciprocal control, check and balance among themselves”² (emphasis added), it is easy to speculate that without more concrete moves to separate and balance power in Burma, “as much as possible” may end up meaning not much at all.

Legislative Branch

If national elections are held based on the National Convention's model, it is promised that “every citizen shall have the right to vote and to stand for election according to the law.” They will vote, specifically, to elect “representatives” from their state or region³ to the Union Legislature (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*), which is made up of two chambers. In one (the *Pyithu*), each state/region is allotted a number of seats based on its population, in the other (*Amyotha*) each state/region is granted an equal number of representatives. One quarter of the seats in both the *Amyotha* and *Pyithu* are reserved for nonelected mem-

bers of the *Tatmadaw* (Burma's military)⁴, as appointed by the Defense Services Commander-in-Chief (currently, General Maung Aye). The military chief will also appoint *Tatmadaw* “representatives” to state/regional legislatures, in still undetermined numbers.

Executive Branch

The Convention does not guarantee that the president (chief executive) will be a member of the *Tatmadaw*. Rather, it ensures that a *Tatmadaw* member will become one of three presidential candidates. Under the proposed system, after the national legislature has been formed, an “electoral college” is created by splitting the legislature into three separate groups: elected *Amyotha* representatives, elected *Pyithu* representatives, and the appointed *Tatmadaw* representatives (from both *Amyotha* and *Pyithu*). Each group votes separately to select a “vice-president” from among their members. Then, the whole legislature selects a president from the three; the other two remain vice-presidents. Before taking office, president and vice-presidents must resign from the legislature and from any other government

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OLD FLAMES

Around 1 a.m. on March 11, Hway Ka Loke (a.k.a. Wangka) refugee camp in western Thailand was attacked using light and heavy weapons, then set ablaze. According to estimates, as much as 90% of the camp, which houses 9,000 Karen and other Burmese refugees, was destroyed by fire. Roughly 1,500 homes, the majority of personal belongings, and most public buildings such as schools and clinics were consumed by fire. At least 30 people were injured, several seriously, threatening to raise the death toll above the three confirmed fatalities. Within 24 hours, two other major refugee camps in the same province were under alert, anticipating attacks from across the border.

This event was in fact a better-organized repeat of a similar incursion on January 27, 1997, over one year ago. Like last year, a well-armed contingent of the Democratic Kayin/Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) entered the camp unimpeded. Splitting into three groups, they took advantage of the confusion created by mortar fire to set the camp alight. There are many reports of random shooting at the fleeing population. This year's attack differs significantly in that people were targeted, not just the physical structures of the camp itself.

The attack on Hway Ka Loke marks a further deterioration of the political situation on both sides of the border, particularly in Karen-held territory north of Three Pagodas Pass. It seems to be rooted in a tense and serious power struggle between the DKBA and the Karen National Union (KNU), locked in a struggle to establish greater power vis-à-vis the Burma Army. Clearly, the DKBA is responsible for this attack. The origins of the current conflict, however, seem to have less to do with refugee issues as such than military events across the border in the regions commonly called (KNU) 7th and northern 6th brigades, where the KNU and DKBA are vying for control of the civilian population.

In the last three years, the DKBA has grown from a SLORC-sponsored puppet militia to a large, if poorly organized and ill-disciplined, collection of nationalist Karen field commanders operating throughout the northern Karen border areas. Under the symbolic and political leadership of U Thuzana, the Myaing Kyi Ngu Sayadaw (meaning abbot of Myaing Kyi Ngu), the DKBA claims its identity as a representative of the Karen Buddhist majority which failed to share a voice in the KNU. The DKBA

headquarters at Myaing Kyi Ngu has become both a political and military center and a religious colony, styled loosely after the famous Pa-an forest monastery at Thammanya, whose abbot is one of the most revered monks in Burma.

The growth of the DKBA has presented a particularly acute dilemma to the KNU, which has faced a serious decline in economic, political and symbolic power in the last several years. Fighting its traditional enemy, the Burma



March 11, 1998: Hway Ka Loke refugee camp, Thailand. [BI]

Army, had always strengthened the KNU's symbolic position regardless of its results. Putting up a fight was good enough to reinforce the belief that Karen people were struggling for something better. To many Karens, the KNU, despite its faults, still represents Karen people resisting oppression by their traditional enemy. They identify it as a struggle to establish "Kawthoolei", a Karen homeland which would fulfill the mythological destiny of the Karen people, who describe themselves as forsaken, misunderstood and perpetually vulnerable to subjugation by alien races. An essential part of the Karen resistance to this oppression is a conviction that the Karen people are in fact united against a common enemy, either the Burma Army or the Burman people, depending on who one asks. The idea of a Karen enemy, embodied in the DKBA, destroys both the belief in a united nationality as well as the familiarity of fighting a traditional enemy.

But for many Karens, the DKBA offered a Karen alternative to the KNU. For some, the DKBA redressed the exploitation of Karen by their own people, challenging a flawed KNU military-administrative machine. This sense was heightened when the SLORC granted the DKBA at least limited autonomy in Karen-populated territories in eastern Burma, making a nominal reality the Karen homeland

which figures so heavily in nationalist propaganda. Regardless of the Burmese military's role in starting up the DKBA, by 1998 it had become a nationalist Karen movement in its own right, relatively well-armed under the auspices of a watchful Burma Army, relying on an extensive network throughout the border regions.

For the last year, the KNU has been taking increasingly desperate measures to fight off the DKBA's influence in the Karen state. The landmine problem has been increasing throughout the contested border regions along the Dawna mountain range. Mines, an under-gunned KNU's weapon of choice for holding territory, have been the cause of so many civilian and military casualties that for the first time in the last years people are expressing fear of returning to their villages because of them. With the DKBA, KNU, and Burma Army all mining roads and fields and then eventually withdrawing from the area, the civilian population is the only sure target. In addition to extensive mining, the KNU has been using very unpopular

hit-and-run tactics against the DKBA, including on February 19, an attack on a village Buddhist festival at Ker Gho, a DKBA-held area, in which civilian revelers as well as DKBA soldiers were killed. According to local sources, KNU units near Myaing Kyi Ngu have been kidnapping villagers to extort money, a common practice in Burmese insurgent movements, but one which has created immense animosity among people in the area.

The rise of the DKBA's influence throughout Karen State and the heightened tensions in the civil war zones have intensified rivalries with the KNU. The Thai refugee camps are still seen as safe havens for KNU supporters; and indeed they do provide food security, education and shelter for people regardless of political affiliation. Nevertheless, they have always served as logistics, recruitment and economic centers for the KNU. The DKBA, wishing to even the playing field, plans to destroy all the camps and force the people back to Burma in order to destroy the KNU's popular support and force it to abandon its own counter-insurgency programs in DKBA-contested areas.

This analysis raises the question of the Burma Army's involvement in the refugee camp attack. The general consensus is that regardless of who else may have been in cooperation, this

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was a DKBA operation. Of course, the arming and transport of DKBA soldiers past the garrison and trade town of Myawaddy necessitated Burma Army cooperation. Refugee camp residents, clinging to the belief that only the traditional enemy, not other Karen, would be capable of such brutality, cite several clues to a Burmese conspiracy, such as that some of the attackers spoke in Burmese, not Karen. Nevertheless, the DKBA has its own agenda in relation to the KNU, its own arms and a strong feeling of independence.

Reliable first-hand reports from DKBA headquarters at Myaing Kyi Ngu further indicate that not only was Wednesday's attack a DKBA plan, but that it is the first in a series of attacks to be expected this season. As early as the first week of March, people in Myaing Kyi Ngu were aware of the DKBA's intentions to attack Hway Ka Loke. On March 11 and 12, truckloads of well-armed DKBA soldiers were spotted heading north of the road to Bae Klaw (also Mae La) refugee camp, on their way to begin an operation against the camp, under command of Maung Chit Thoo. Beginning on March 12, Bae Klaw camp and the surrounding hillsides have been subject to mortar shelling as KNU, DKBA, and Thai military forces all jockey for advantage.

This background serves to provide some frame of reference for Wednesday's events, but it also

suggests what the future holds for the refugees. Clearly, there will be no security for them in Thailand, no matter what demands are made, and whether or not the U.N. attempts to intervene. The Thai military is neither prepared nor is disposed to provide long-term security for anyone, Thai or Karen, along this border. Indeed, these large-scale attacks merely serve as reminders of the overall collapse of security in the border districts, where armed bandits terrorize not only refugee camps but Thai villages and highways as well. Unless Thai and international policies towards Burmese refugees change, the refugees will face two clearly troubling options: living in increasing insecurity along the border or going back to Burma.

This ultimatum is a bitter reality for many people. Some have lived in Thai refugee camps for over a decade, cut off from Burma, addicted to humanitarian aid and waiting on some kind of useful leadership. The universal response from refugees up and down the border to questions about the future is that they simply don't know. They wish for protection and aid from the U.N. or the Thai government, yet neither has the will or the power to intervene meaningfully at this late stage of the crisis. Those refugees who support the KNU hold a similar wish for external salvation: aid from the U.N., arms from America, succor and unconditional support from the outside. The prospect of returning to Burma is, perhaps ironically, the only

option with a glimmer of hope at all. For many, the struggle for peace and human dignity was knocked off course as soon as they began to see themselves as refugees and define their problems as such. The long-held refrain that the refugees would go back to Burma once peace and democracy reigned was not hope at all, but the antithesis of hope, a resignation that to build a better future was out of one's hands. Attacks on the refugees provide another powerful jolt – a shocking realization for the people about how off-course they have wandered, from people struggling for dignity within their own country to unwanted exiles divorced from it.

In the final analysis, the peace and justice they yearn for can only be achieved from within Burma, by their own effort and responsibility. But going back to Burma in itself is not the answer, for it is a dangerous and insecure process. If people will return, they must do so with the support and observation of a world community that understands that their struggle continues to be on the other side of the border. Building peace inside Burma is a daunting task, but one more hopeful and worthy of support than the road which brought them here.



Chris Cusano

'Constitution,' cont'd from page 3

posts (presumably including the military) thus ensuring that all of the three top executives are, nominally at least, civilians. Again, at the state/region level, Tatmadaw members will be appointed to the executive body by the military supreme commander "to undertake responsibilities of the defense, security, border administration, etc."

Judicial Branch

The National Convention has not indicated how the judiciary is chosen – whether members will be elected or appointed to judicial bodies at the national level, region/state level, or self-administered areas. It says simply that the judiciary at the national and region/state level is constituted for "independent administration of justice in accord with the law," but no further stipulation is made on how the branch will remain independent. The national judiciary is referred to as the "supreme law courts of the State" but its authority is not yet clarified beyond "powers to issue writs."

Though the Convention refers to the highest judiciary as the nation's "supreme law court," this court is not explicitly granted the authority to interpret constitutional law, as are the national supreme or high courts in most de-

mocracies. Instead, the constitution is interpreted by a Constitutional Tribunal, which has authority at any level of government, "to interpret provisions of the State Constitution, to scrutinize whether or not laws... are in conformity with the State Constitution, to decide on disputes in connection with the State Constitution... to perform other duties prescribed in the State Constitution." Again, the National Convention is so far silent on how the members of this Constitutional Tribunal will be selected. However, the vague though ominous assertion is made elsewhere that the Tatmadaw "is main [sic] responsible for safeguarding the State Constitution," which at the very least fails to exclude the military from membership in, or control over, this Constitutional Tribunal.

Rule by the ruled?

If democracy is understood by its broad meaning as "rule by the ruled," it is clear that under this new constitution, the people of Burma will take only a small step toward ruling their own country. "Rule by the ruled" requires that citizens have power to choose their own government, directly or by means of representatives – that it is ultimately the people who *hire* and *fire* those in office. Under the new constitution, the people will have explicit authority to hire members of only one of the three main

"branches" of government – their legislature. As to firing anyone, the Convention states that "voters concerned shall have the right... to recall elected people's representatives." If people can only oust the ones they voted into office, that so far excludes members of the executive including president and vice presidents, the members of the judiciary, and all appointed Tatmadaw members of government. President and vice-presidents may be removed by impeachment by the legislature, but the process may only continue if 2/3 of the legislature "concerned" (either Pyithu or Amyotha) support the charge. It's difficult to understand the exact meaning of this stipulation, but essentially giving veto powers to a body "concerned" with the charges does not suggest separation of powers. In addition, with Tatmadaw explicitly involved in all government, there remains the fact that there will be politicians active in every part of the system who are answerable not to a public constituency, but to the military hierarchy. Finally "emergency powers" permit, based on severity of the threat to safety or national sovereignty, the president, Tatmadaw or military supreme commander to completely take over power at the state/region or national level, with no time limit or any other clearly defined restrictions.

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THE STORY OF YAWTHIT

...a story about people's power to change their own lives for the better.

Yawthit is a Karen-Buddhist village in the Irrawaddy Delta region of Burma. Most of the villagers are hard-working farmers, but because of the system they remain very poor. Since Burma's independence more than 50 years ago, the government has done nothing for the development of the village. When events in this story took place 20 years ago, Yawthit had no school, no teacher, no clinic, no midwife, no health workers — nothing at all.

People generally agree that Yawthit's history is one of the reasons for this. In the late 60's, when the civil war was still being fought in the Delta, the Burma Army launched an all-out offensive against the Karen insurgents, and Yawthit village was the site of one of the last battles of the offensive. It was there that Bo Than Shein, a famous Karen commander, was captured and executed in front of all the villagers, shot in the head by the Burmese commander. The state-run newspapers and the radio news reported that Bo Than Shein was killed in action.

Since that time, the Burma Army considered Yawthit an enemy village. What could the people do? As civilians, they had no choice but to welcome both the Burma Army and the Karen insurgents whenever they came to the village. They provided food, money, labor, porters to both parties — anything they asked for.

In the summer of 1977, the village elders gathered in the Buddhist *zayat* (meditation center) and talked about the various problems in the village. They all agreed: there was no point in waiting for the government to help them. After a lot of discussion, they resolved to work together to solve their own problems, one step at a time.

Yawthit had no clinic of its own, no health workers or midwives. Anyone who was sick or injured and needed medical care had to make a day's journey by cart to get to the township hospital. If, as it sometimes happened, the hospital was full, they could wait for days to be admitted. As the town had no lodgings, it was difficult for people to stay and wait in town.

Even though medical treatment in Burma is said to be free of charge, people have to buy

medicine on the black market at very high prices. Villagers who were very poor didn't even bother going to the hospital when they got sick; they already knew couldn't afford the medication. Children were malnourished and were often ill — many died before they were five years old.



The villagers. By Thaw Tu Say, age 13, Hway Ka Loke Refugee Camp.

The village elders decided to open a small clinic and hire a medic to serve in the village. But, they wondered, how would they find a health worker willing to come to live in their remote village, and how could they get all the medicines needed for a clinic? They collected money, and the community organizer in the village tried to contact health workers and doctors in Rangoon. Some pastors announced the need during the Sunday services. One Sunday morning a young woman, Dr. Myitta, answered the call. She came to Yawthit to work.

Just three weeks after Dr. Myitta arrived, a group of government officials and soldiers from the Burma Army showed up at her house. They surrounded it, and the armed captain and two soldiers came inside. "What is your name?" the captain asked her. She told them.

He sat down. "*Thamee* (which means daughter), to be honest, we are here to arrest you and the organizer in this village. The government people said that you came here to reform the Karen movement. I'll handle those fools later. My name is Captain —; I am also a Chin national. Your father and I were in the army together; he was my commander. How is he these days?"

"My father is well," Dr. Myitta told him. "He is now a member of the Council of State of the Burma Socialist Party."

"I'm glad to know that you are here to serve

the people," said the captain. At that, he got up and went out. The soldiers and officials left. A month later, Dr. Myitta was called back to Rangoon by her father. The Chin captain was forced to retire and was replaced by a Burman.

Yawthit was again without a doctor. The village organizer contacted the pastors in Rangoon, asking them for help. This time, the call was answered by a young Burman woman, Dr. Thitsa, from a very important and well-to-do family in Rangoon. Ever since her student days, Dr. Thitsa had dreamed of serving the people. She decided, against her father's will, to come to Yawthit and work for the people.

The villagers expected only a medic. When they heard that another doctor was coming, they let out a shout — they couldn't believe their good fortune. The vil-

lage headman said, "Though our government is not good, it is good to learn that there are still educated young people who are willing to sacrifice their talent to serve the people." But people still wondered, how long will this one be able to stay with us?

They built a small bamboo clinic hut in the center of the village and named it Yawthit People's Cooperative Clinic, and bought medicine with money they had collected.

In the first month after Dr. Thitsa arrived, people from twenty nearby villagers came to her clinic. The villagers arranged for the sick to stay in the houses of the villagers. Later, the Buddhist monks allowed the sick people to use the *zayat* for the sick.

After a few months, Dr. Thitsa, concerned that medications were too expensive, went to town and met with government leaders there, and asked them to help provide medicine for her clinic. "We can't help you," they said. "Not even the township hospital has medicine. You can get all the medicine you need on the black market."

Under such conditions, Dr. Thitsa reflected, prevention was as necessary as treatment. She began to organize young people and mothers and gave training in community health, first aid, nutrition and family planning. However, she did not give up trying to find medicines for the village. She went to Rangoon and talked

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with some friends about the problem. She visited an army major, a doctor at the Burma Military Hospital, and told him about her problems getting medications. The army doctor organized and collected medicine from some of his close friends every month for the clinic.

It was not easy to get the medicine from Rangoon up to the village. In Burma at that time it was forbidden to transport medicine from one township to another without official permission. Once, the village organizer was arrested by the port police, and the medicine and his ID were confiscated. Only with the help of the Rangoon army doctor did he manage to get back his ID card and the medicine and return to the village.

Dr. Thitsa had been in the village for six months when she received a summons. She was to come to town for questioning.

The villagers couldn't believe it: Dr. Thitsa came to them to save lives; why were the authorities giving her trouble? Would she be taken, too? On the day of the questioning, a group of villagers went to town to watch the hearing. They were ready to risk the worst if anything should happen to their doctor. The government leaders were shocked to see so many people from out of town.

The uniformed officials sat at a table facing the doctor. They fired questions at her: "You are a doctor; you could be very rich in

Rangoon. Why would you come to this village?" they asked. "Who is behind all this? Who is supporting you? Where did you get your medicine? Who is supplying you? Do you have contact with Karen rebels?"

Dr. Thitsa listened to their questions. When they were finished, she answered them very simply. "I am not Karen," she said. "I am Burman. I came to Yawthit because on my graduation day, the professor made a speech. He told us, 'Go to the people and serve them; only then will our country be developed.' Now I am here to serve the people. I personally asked for your support and cooperation, as did the village elders, to help us find medicine for our clinic. I'm working here to save lives, and help improve life in this village. What have I done wrong? If saving lives and serving people is a sin, then you can arrest me anytime."

The court was silent. The officials had no more questions. Dr. Thitsa was free to leave. The villagers yelled out in celebration.

Twenty years have gone by since Dr. Thitsa's hearing. Now Yawthit has a small 10-bed hospital, built by the villagers with bricks that they baked themselves. Today in Yawthit, you can see all kinds of new projects, gardens and poultry farms, all of them planned and built by the villagers themselves, working together.



Robina

Continued from 'Predictions', page 2
out proper guarantee of their safety.

The international crisis

To preserve their power, Burma's military will also take advantage of what can be called the crisis of the international community. This crisis is based on the fact that the international community often lacks a clear understanding of the true problems creating the civil war in Burma. They see it more in terms of a political conflict rather than an ethnic conflict. The military can exploit this tenuous analysis to gain the edge they need to retain control.

The ruling council's recent change – from State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) – was a move to divert international attention from economic to political issues. While the international community may suspect that the change is only a superficial one, still criticism is abated as they adopt a "wait and see" attitude. Furthermore, a good number of the ministers in the new SPDC are civilians. This looks good to the international community, as it suggests a softening of the political front, again providing the junta with more room to operate.

Conclusions

By diverting attention to the political front and away from the ethnic, economic, social, and religious fronts, the military will be able to prolong their authority for a long time yet. Once they feel that they have the economic problems under control, they will move to reassert their control over the political front.

The ethnic groups remain disunified and have been unable to express a clear and comprehensive strategy for bringing about a true peace to Burma. Unless this changes, tripartite dialogue will be impossible and the ethnic issue will be further marginalized. Any moves towards peace which happen in this context, without input from Burma's ethnic minority groups, will probably prove to not be long-lasting and war will erupt once again.

Unless the international community becomes more deeply aware of the roots of conflict in Burma, it will maintain its "wait and see" attitude, which simply prolongs the war and is an obstacle to any progress towards a true peace in Burma.

Saw Thu War

*Continued from 'Constitution', page 5*

Even in a so-called democracy, politicians often only act as "public servants" when they have no choice – when their political power is both limited and conditional. Sections of government must have clear mandates, hold incomplete power, and have direct and explicit controls over each other. However, so far the Convention only describes structures – it does not sufficiently detail any of the powers or responsibilities of various offices. Without clear and effective checks and balances to power, and without systems which allow the people to recall or reprimand the majority of their leaders, there is no way for government or citizens to effectively address the corruption, cronyism and entourage politics that have so crippled Burma's system in the past. Elections under the National Convention's model may be as "free" and "fair" as anyone likes, but unless significant power is conferred on the people, and authority is clearly divided between segments of government, elections alone will not bring the people of Burma sufficiently closer to ruling their own country.



E. Zeamer (E.M.)

Endnotes, 'Constitution'

- 1 The National Convention was created by the SLORC in 1993, charged with the task not of drafting a constitution, but with "laying down principles to serve as base in drafting an enduring State Constitution." These 'principles', as they are publicized in state-run media, are generally assumed to reflect what the final document will contain.
- 2 All quoted material not otherwise cited comes from a series of seven articles published in the New Light of Myanmar, all by Maung Kyi Lin: (1-3) "Five tasks accomplished by National Convention," 22-25 Apr 1994. (4) "Sixth major task accomplished by National Convention," 20 Apr 1995. (5-7) "Seventh major task accomplished by National Convention," 25-27 Apr 1996.
- 3 In the new system, the term "region" will replace the current term "division". Burma is currently divided into a total of 14 large administrative areas, consisting of 7 divisions and 7 states; a carryover from British rule. When the British divided Burma into administrative areas, the central areas were called divisions which were generally more closely controlled; while the more outlying regions were called states, which generally had more autonomy. Thus, the states are contain most ethnic minority areas, while the majority of the Burman population lives in the divisions.
- 4 Specifically, the total union legislature or Pyidaungsu Hluttaw will have 664 members, broken down as follows:

	Elected representatives	Tatmadaw appointees
Pyithu (no. based on population of state/region)		
	330	110
Amyotha (12 from each state/region)	168	56
Total	498	166

The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"After embracing the open-market economy the only booming business here is prostitution." – *A noodle seller in Rangoon.*

...

"I don't think it's a matter of potential disaster. The reality is it's already a disaster." – *Dr Bruce Weniger, former director of the AIDS field station of the American Centers for Disease Control in Thailand, on the AIDS epidemic in Burma.*

...

"The ABSDF armed group was in search of opportunities to commit terrorist acts in the country. They were not only planning destructive acts but also instigating public unrest in cooperation with the BCP's underground agents." – *SPDC Col. Kyaw Thein, on the arrest of 40 dissidents in early March.*

...

"I have decided that the project must continue. I don't have the right to stop it." – *Thai PM Chuan announcing the decision not to delay or reroute the Thai portion of the Yadana gas pipeline.*

...

"Now people do not distinguish between right and wrong. This project is being allowed to continue simply because 80% of it is done." – *Phinun Chotiraseeranee, leader of the Kanchanaburi Environmental Group, on the Thai government's decision to allow the Yadana gas pipeline to continue.*

"The province must find out if all refugees have really fled from fighting. If so, they will be allowed to stay in that area until the situation is better." – *Mae Hong Son's Governor Pakdi Chomphooming explaining how his administration will deal with 400 refugees who fled from Shan State.*

...

"I changed \$50 at a money exchanger at 270 kyat for one dollar, but when I eat at a restaurant I have to convert kyat back to dollars at 300 kyat per dollar." – *A Western tourist, who tried to speculate on the kyat, complaining about the reality of exchange rates in Burma.*

...

"The FEC [Foreign Exchange Certificate] is equivalent to the US dollar and helps us keep control of dollars. Even if you change the FEC in the black market, the difference will not be more than one or two percent.... Adjusting the exchange rate may be the private sector's suggestion, but the government will continue keeping the rate at six kyat to the dollar. As I told you, we have FEC to control the dollar." – *Khin Muang Latt, director general of Burma's Directorate of Hotels and Tourism.*

...

"I realized that the biggest hindrance to development and peace in our country was the civil war." – *Former Thirty Comrades member Kyaw Zaw urging the military junta to institute changes.*

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