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"These findings were proof that the beginning of human life and civilization began in Burma. Should the academics be able to obtain proof of this, then Burmese people could definitely say that 'Culture began in Myanmar.'"

-- SPDC Secretary-1 Khin Nyunt commenting on fossils and bones found recently in northern Burma.

Drawing by Taw Nay Htoo, 15, Huay Kaloke Refugee Camp.

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FACETS OF A BUDDHIST ARMY: PART 1

When the Democratic Kayin (Karen) Buddhist Army (DKBA) split from the Karen National Union (KNU) in late 1994, looming religious factionalism crystallized into institutional division. One of the most resilient ethnic minority armies in contemporary Burma was cleaved in two – a part drawn into realignment with the military government, the other left a crippled version of business-as-usual. Little effort has since been made at analysis of subsequent affairs. While the DKBA does not lend itself easily to external scrutiny, this should not deter efforts. In Karen, it is simply the "Karen Buddhist Army." Each of these words suggests an organization that is a product of greater nationalist, religious and militarist ideologies.

I will confine this study to two inquiries. While particular to the DKBA, they approach issues relevant to the struggle for peace in Burma as a whole. Firstly, how should we interpret the existence of a "Buddhist army"? In this article, I suggest it is a product of complex long-term relationships between traditional religion and Buddhism, and in turn between religion and ethnocentric politics. That's to say, implicit in its being a "Buddhist army" is its being "Karen." In a later article, I will proceed to characterize the overall dimensions of the intra-ethnic conflict (between the DKBA and KNU) as fundamentally nationalist, not religious, in nature.

A "Buddhist army" isn't an easy concept to come to terms with. Buddhism mandates nonkilling, an army is called upon to kill. Buddhist theology emphasizes nonviolence; military practice stresses the opposite. To begin, let us not take for granted that the DKBA is "Buddhist" in the way that Western convention might have it. This is not a value judgement. Nor is it made on the grounds that it is a militarist organization and therefore outside of religious doctrine (as neither European logic nor Buddhist laws are necessarily relevant). Rather, it is a statement of recognition that Buddhist practice is typically accompanied by some other religious heritage. Lay people hold beliefs that have coalesced from multi-religious roots.

This being the case, the DKBA religious infrastructure is made up of at least two distinct systems – firstly, a combination of traditional religious beliefs and, secondly, Buddhist-sanctioned magic and myth. When these are co-opted into Burma's ethnic-nationalist environment, there are subsequent political ramifications. To appreciate the depth of these ramifications, we need first look at the religious aspects of this organization, and then at how they serve parallel political agendas.

Supernaturalist elements

Broadly defined, supernaturalism is a set of animist (folk religion) beliefs and practices employed in conjunction with one another. Day-to-day problems are believed to occur due to interference by predominantly malevolent spirits, and solutions are sought through ritual:

> **"Religious visionaries offer salvation – not only in the next life, but this one too. They promise deliverance from the enemy; a day when the conquered become the conquerors."**

(T)he life of the Karen has been dominated by... beliefs in unseen and malicious powers, which seem to be always in waiting to take offence and do some harm... Their ceremonies and offerings are, therefore, inspired by personal and utilitarian motives, namely, to avert danger and bring good fortune. (Marshall, pp. 233-4)

Practitioners serve as mediators between natural and supernatural realms of existence. Through them, the benefits of worship accrue to followers. In the DKBA's case, they also happen to be Buddhist *Sayadaws* (abbots/monastic leaders). Of greatest significance are, firstly, the DKBA's spiritual and organizational head, U Thuzana, Myaing Kyi Ngu Sayadaw; and, secondly, the head of one of the largest monasteries in eastern Burma, U Winaya, Thamanyar Sayadaw. Let's focus on what rank-and-file DKBA take their religious practice to mean in organizational context, via illustrations of the supernatural properties attributed to these holy men.

Initiates into the DKBA drink a cup of water to seal their oath of allegiance, which binds the recruit, firstly, to the Myaing Kyi Ngu Sayadaw, and secondly, to strict vegetarianism. It is said to be impossible to lie to the Sayadaw having sealed the oath. Breach of the oath would cause all kinds of physical problems, described variously as anything from headaches and stomach ailments, to heightened exposure to physical injury and sudden death – particular concerns to men in military service. There are corollary benefits in following the teachings. These are understood to include exceptional physical strength and endurance, protection from bullets or landmines, and so on.

In swearing the oath, a direct link is formed between the applicant and spiritual leader. For an organization attempting to cobble together a diverse range of actors across a wide area, this is an important device. It explicitly reinforces the organizational hierarchy and thereby, the obligation to follow orders. Supernatural reminders of this relationship can even be applied geographically. At some DKBA-constructed bridges, for example, women are under instructions to cross only on foot so as not to offend the local guardian spirit. No explanations are given for this dictate; none are needed. What followers are made explicitly aware of is the exclusive requirement to obey.

Although Thamanyar Sayadaw is not actually associated with the DKBA, there is great veneration of the elderly Sayadaw among the DKBA membership. Thamanyar Sayadaw is said to be protected by spirits surrounding and residing in his monastery. These spirits worship him, and only he can see them. This ethereal security force keeps him informed on the arrival there of any evildoers, and the spirits are able to turn away anybody bringing meat into the compound, such as by running cars off the road. Other powers attributed to Thamanyar Sayadaw include abilities to levitate and to project enormous images of himself onto the clouds. Feats associated with one of his subordinates include abilities to speak every language on the face of the earth, to tame animals, and so on.

What does animist ritual offer that Buddhism does not? Put succinctly by a Chinese priest: "For our well-being in future existences, we worship the Buddha... but for our well-being in the present life, we worship the [animist god] and his copper image...." (Maung Htin Aung, p.137). Buddhism is a religion of eternal salvation, largely concerned with otherworldly forms of existence. Supernaturalist ritual, on the other hand, provides straightforward courses of action to deal with day-to-day needs. For the DKBA, it is also part of the mortar between the organizational bricks.

Buddhist Parameters

How can Buddhist Sayadaws participate in apparently non-Buddhist religious practice? As animist faith holds no sway beyond this immediate, lowly plane of existence, it plays a subordinate role to Buddhism. But strict

Buddhism, although widely held as being free of supernatural beliefs, is in fact not so:

(A)nimistic beliefs, as well as ritual, are perfectly compatible with orthodox Buddhism... [There is a] false assumption that 'pure' Buddhism is... an exclusively ethical system, devoid of supernatural beliefs and rites. But if this assumption does not even hold for canonical Buddhism, it most surely does not hold for contemporary Buddhism, which includes a host of animistic beliefs.... (Spiro, pp. 251-2)

Buddhism and supernaturalism, then, can be made to reinforce one another. Monks take positions of authority over the supernatural because they are higher religious practitioners than those engaged in purely animist practice. They can be called upon to conduct orthodox Buddhist rites to combat non-Buddhist powers. A recent case alleged sudden and repeated supernatural activity following the posting of a regular Burma Army unit at a frontier village. The unit commander requested permission to withdraw, but instead two monks were sent (by a higher officer) to clean the place up via ritual. Taken in this context, DKBA religious practice is not unusual.

A more distinctive characteristic of the DKBA is its use of Buddhist religious devices to explicitly reaffirm the mandate of their organizational hierarchy, in a like manner to their application of supernatural mechanisms. For example, the legacy of Buddhist mythology is invoked to lend credibility to Myaing Kyi Ngu Sayadaw, through parallels with Buddha Guatama. Like the Buddha, it is said that the Sayadaw meditated for 49 days in the jungle, without food, [illegible] or sleep. During that time, a giant cobra came and provided protection by wrapping itself around him, just as the legendary *naga* protected the Buddha from a storm. Taken historically though, this organizational behavior also is not particularly unusual, and the reason for that is related more to ethnic-nationalist politics than religious priorities. Let's turn to this component of the problem.

Political Ends

The relationship between supernaturalism and Buddhism is by no means exclusive to these two religions. Recently, a Christian-supernaturalist-militarist organization, popularly known as "God's Army" (a paramilitary affiliate of the KNU), was born in implicit response to the DKBA. Adherents maintain that a great nationalist fighter has been resurrected, and as a child with the power to make himself invisible, has led them to at least one miraculous victory. Other minority sects invoke medleys of Buddhist, Christian and supernaturalist beliefs, legends and iconography as vehicles to broader social objectives.

These seemingly diverse groups have a set of common characteristics, broadly: an ethnocentric world-view, desire for social advancement, and adherence to the agenda of a prophetic leader. Organizational behavior among minority groups in Burma has historically been identified with aspirations towards, but rejection of specific participation in, the dominant culture: "(B)oth the envy toward the superior civilizations of their neighbors... and the bitterness of their lot when those neighbors became oppressors combined to drive them to seek redress in religion" (Stern, p. 299). When this condition gives rise to charismatics who marry these religious convictions to political ones, the process is begun.

Here is the root of the problem. Along a thread of peoples who have traditionally seen themselves as downtrodden, marginalized and discriminated against by dominant and aggressive neighbors, religious visionaries offer salvation – not only in the next life, but this one too. They promise deliverance from the enemy; a day when the conquered become the conquerors. Religious devices are, and have long been used to legitimize this mandate. Cults identified by missionaries in the 19th century "gave unambiguous voice to political aspirations" of their adherents (Stern, p. 304). They operated with strong organizational frameworks and often with defiant if not openly rebellious militancy towards the central authorities. Religious autonomy is the tool; ethnic dispossession, the complaint.

The DKBA typifies this model. The Myaing Kyi Ngu Sayadaw is at the apex of a marriage between religious might and militant nationalism, pointing out the direction to the Promised Land. For some, the DKBA nationalist claim may seem rather contentious. After all, have they not aligned themselves with their traditional "oppressors"? Has the Sayadaw not been used by the Burma Army to bring down the only real model of Karen autonomy, the KNU? I will pursue this question in my next article, and argue that in fact, the failure of the KNU to "deliver" created the vacuum which allowed for the creation and appeal of the DKBA. From their viewpoint, to fulfill their ultimate mandate requires reunification of the race, and this obligates destruction of the defunct older model. Regardless of whether or not the DKBA are serving as a proxy for the objectives of the Burma Army, in the eyes of the participant rank-and-file, they are at very least serving an autonomous body, personified by the Myaing Kyi Ngu Sayadaw, even if they are not still engaged in an all-out struggle for national autonomy.

Conclusion

What the DKBA is not is a short-term incongruity. It is the direct product of specific historical phenomena. Its spiritual leaders, proclaimed and adopted, are at the core of a movement that is both magical and political. The Myaing Kyi Ngu Sayadaw consummates the marriage of nationalist mandate to unorthodox religious practice. As the military lives of the rank-and-file are dictated by obedience and daily discipline, so too their spiritual needs are satisfied by observance of ritual and instructions from superiors. In so doing they also satisfy organizational needs.

That militarism is at odds with fundamental Buddhist principles is not an obstacle. No belief system exists without conflict between doctrine and practice. Buddhism in Burma is no exception, where the religious landscape has been characterized by tension for centuries. Coexistence may be uncomfortable, but participants have a range of spiritual and secular needs clamoring for satisfaction. The DKBA might be a recipe for doctrinal conflict, but a gamut of pragmatic objectives override abstract theological concerns. In short, they go with what works.

A "Buddhist army" may be a more unusual manifestation of the pressures in contemporary Burma, but it is not something new *per se*. The process fuelling it and other militarist organizations requires far greater study. At the root of this dynamic are the same conditions of ethnic mistrust and narrow nationalism that have fueled the bulk of the country's conflict. Genuine resolution will only occur when participants recognize that religious division, narrow nationalism and militarist autonomy are not synonymous with self determination, real freedom and peace.

❖ *Hsaingt Seetsar*

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LAND & SURVIVAL: PACIFYING BURMA'S UPLAND FARMERS

The hills and mountains which blanket most of Burma's border regions are also Burma's civil war areas, and the inhabitants of these mountains are many of Burma's ethnic minority groups. Most of the people in these areas are, however, not insurgents but farmers, and as such they are increasingly faced with a fundamental problem – they are running out of land to farm. The issues causing uplanders in Burma to lose their lands are complex, but most link directly back to government efforts at "national reconsolidation" and stabilization of the border areas. The Burma Army's four-cuts strategy directly targets local villagers rather than insurgent armies, based on the reality that an insurgent army cannot exist in a vacuum – rebel armies, much smaller than government forces and generally with very limited resources, rely on the support of the local community in order to survive and operate. In civilian or pacified areas, upland farmers who inconvenience development projects or other government plans face eviction from their lands. Unless conditions change, the long term effect of a combination of government activities in Burma's border areas will be that millions of people will lose their way of life.

Upland famers clearing a hillside field. [BI]

Civil war zones

Civil war has had a devastating effect on upland or swidden[1] communities throughout Burma's border areas (for an overview of swidden or upland farming, see the box opposite). Destruction of food stores is part of Burma Army strategy in civil war areas to weaken villagers' connections with insurgents and drive stable communities into crisis, scattering the people and bringing areas of territory into military control. The systematic destruction of rice stores and crops has been documented throughout the civil war and newly-pacified areas. When people run out of food completely, often after a year of living in hiding and surviving off of small emergency crops and hidden rice stores, they must finally abandon their land or face starvation. Thousands of communities have been dislodged this way.

The military strategy to destroy food security in insurgent areas is often particularly effective at starving out the more traditional swidden farming communities. For instance, many more traditional communities will not farm a land that has been damaged in some way which violates strict clearing and planting taboos.[2] As one villager from Belin (Bilin) Township in Mon State reported: "If the fields are in some way damaged prior to the appropriately defined date by which they must be burnt, then the local people will no longer use them."[3]

Forced relocations are a more direct means the military uses to clear out territory and disrupt civilian populations. For example, the Shan Human Rights Foundation recently documented that large rural areas of at least 11 townships in Shan State have been totally depopulated through forced relocation; areas affected by forced relocations in 1997 alone cover 7,000 square miles, directly affect at least 300,000 people.[4] People are then given only a few days to leave their villages. At relocation sites, generally no services are provided at all, and movement is very restricted, so it is often difficult or impossible for them to access their fields.

Even those who do not move to "relocation sites" must simply go wherever they can, whether or not there is farmland available. One farmer who's village had been ordered to relocate fled instead, with about 200 other families, to a village in an area covered by a cease-fire. He described conditions in the cease-fire area: "We don't have enough rice and salt, and we cannot find bamboo to build our houses. Before we had work, but now we don't. In this area, it is very difficult to find new land for swidden cultivation as most of the land is already owned by the local people. We are now facing many difficulties for food as well as for health and education for our children."[5] Areas of Papun District, Karen State have experienced population pressures for years now, since the Burma Army penetrated the area in 1992. In one location, villages that prior to 1992 were fairly stable at around 30 houses have grown to over 200 houses as villagers from other areas flee military activities. According to one person from the area, "soil fertility was not good – this is because in that area there should be at least a three or four year cycle on the usage of one plot of land for dry rice plantations, however the cycle is now every two years at most, and frequently the land is used annually."[6] In this case, a community lucky enough for the time being to lie outside the bounds of the civil war zone has not yet lost its land, but is nevertheless losing its future as the soil fertility in the area is destroyed by overfarming due to overpopulation.

Pacification

Between its military successes and cease-fire agreements with insurgent groups, Burma's border areas are gradually being transformed into civilian areas under government control. The first stage of establishing government control to former insurgent areas is generally strict martial law, under which movement is severely restricted and populations are purged of insurgents using terror and intelligence activities. The government is preparing for long-term control by building a broad network of roads in Burma's border regions which will bring much of Burma's outback into the reach of the military and the government, and many once-isolated people in contact with the "outside." This transformation is being effected through the government's much-vaunted Border Areas Development Program (BADP), which includes development projects, such as schools, clinics, irrigation projects designed to win the hearts and minds of ethnic minority people in newly pacified areas. However, the majority of BADP program spending is on infrastructure[7] (supplemented by forced labor and other forced contributions from the local communities); thousands of kilometers of roads have been upgraded and built under this plan.

It remains to be seen how communities will be permitted to disperse once an area is firmly under government control, and what restrictions they will have to live under. However, a way of life in which communities frequently move, split, and scatter is naturally counter to Rangoon's primary goal: control over both territory and populations. In Burma, "national security" has consistently taken priority over civilian food security and indeed, nearly all other issues.

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UPLAND FARMING, AN OVERVIEW

More than 60% of Burma's working population are farmers, and the majority of them farm rice. One of the most significant differences between farmers in Burma isn't so much what they grow, but where they grow it. The archetypal image of rural Southeast Asia – the lush green flooded rice paddy – is typical only in Burma's irrigated lowlands. Millions of people, live in the forested hills and mountains of Burma and support themselves by growing "dry rice," grains, and cash crops. While lowland farmers farm fields that may have held the same shape for generations, upland farmers tend to be swidden or shifting cultivators, so called because they shift their farms from field to field over the years. In such communities, land rights are usually based not with individual households, but with the whole community, encompassing crops, fallow fields and community forest. Though imported Chinese machinery and other innovations are slowly penetrating lowland areas, the majority of upland farmers, especially those living in more remote areas, use the same methods and implements that their ancestors used.

Swidden farming is a traditional cultivation system that has been in use by upland people around the world for centuries. Generally, swidden farmers clear and farm a field for a few years at a time, then leave it to lie fallow for about seven to twelve years, during which time the jungle regrows and the soil is gradually replenished. A fallow field is cleared of growth by first cutting the trees and vegetation, then by burning off the cuttings. The burning allows new seeds to grow without the need for much weeding, and the ash fertilizes the soil. Most communities almost never clear virgin forest for cultivation due to cultural reasons as well as practical ones: large old-growth trees are more difficult to fell than the younger trees which have grown up in a fallow field.

For swidden methods to be sustainable in the relatively poor soil of upland areas, population concentration must be fairly low. The life-style of upland communities reflects this fact as many villages change locations over the years, and communities often split as population increases. In order to have long enough fallow periods, the amount of land that an upland community collectively "owns" is necessarily much larger than the amount of land that is farmed at any given time, as anthropologist E.R Leach recounted of the upland Kachin, "...the land which a village headman will claim as being 'our land' is normally an area of anything from 10 to 20 times that which is actually being cultivated."[2] For this reason, swidden communities' land holdings are often community-based, rather than household-based.

Swidden farming is probably one of the most controversial farming methods ever, since more than any other group, it is swidden (often called slash-and-burn) farmers who are blamed for the world's tropical deforestation problem. As a result, uplanders have become the targets of large-scale environmental development projects. For example, the Asian Development Bank recently announced preliminary studies for a project called "Poverty Alleviation and Environmental Improvement in the Greater Mekong Subregion." The project would target 60 million people living in watershed areas in six Mekong countries including Burma, with the ultimate goal of eradicating shifting cultivation for the region.[3]

However, under conditions in which communities are free to follow tradition and environmental conditions are stable, there is extensive evidence that swidden agriculture is a sustainable farming system. Swidden farming becomes unsustainable when population pressures, land restrictions or other conditions limit the land available – a situation which many upland communities increasingly face. Controversy over swidden cultivation is also unavoidably an ethnic issue, as upland groups tend to be ethnic minorities, subsistence farmers living largely outside the social and economic mainstream of the country. Burma is a classic case in point, where the majority Burmans are almost exclusively lowland cultivators, while Burma's swidden cultivators are ethnic minorities, including the Karen, Karenni, Chin, Kachin, and Wa.

Please see footnotes on page 6. ❖

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Civilian government policy

Burma's upland farmers will still have a battle to protect their land and defend their land rights, even after fighting has ended and a "civilian" government established. The country's land laws are an important case in point. Strictly speaking, nobody in Burma has any land rights. According to constitutional law, the government legally owns the entire country,[8] which means that land anywhere can be "nationalized" at any time. Basic land tenure rights, as far as they are legally recognized, do not protect anyone from land confiscation. Swidden farmers are at the same time the least likely to have documentation of their land tenure, and also they are unlikely to have the means or the skills to defend their rights in a system formulated around lowland land use patterns, and also rife with corruption (for more on the legal system in Burma, see *BI*, June 1998, "Towards the rule of law.")

Burma's land laws are designed around the needs of lowland paddy farmers, not shifting cultivators: Burma's legal system does not recognize any community-based land rights whatsoever. Household-based land rights for shifting cultivators are inappropriately defined as well – according to an agricultural survey conducted in 1993, the average *taungya* holding (Burmese for swidden) was only 1.7 acres, tiny by any standards, and much too small to include fallow land.[9] Thus, swidden farmers who lose their land have no means to defend their rights within Burma's legal system.

This works well for the government development plans. As Burma's military government turns its focus toward economic development of the border areas, swidden farmers will be dealt with as the inconvenient inhabitants of Burma's valuable forests. According to geographer Raymond Bryant, Burmese government conservation plans have already been outlined for the entire country which include the goal of "stabiliz[ing] swidden cultivators through incentives, demonstration[s] and technical assistance."[10] According to Bryant, "If successful, [the government's land reservation campaign] will spell the end of swidden cultivation as a way of life in Burma at the same time as it will facilitate the consolidation of central authority in border regions."[11]

A taste of what is perhaps to come can be seen in Burma's Myinmolekat Nature Reserve in Karen and Mon States, from which thousands of Karen villagers were forcibly evicted during early 1997.[12] Myinmolekat is more than an environmental protection project – it is clearly a buffer zone for valuable foreign investment projects, as the park area follows the Yadana gas pipeline and billions of dollars in planned industrial and trade development projects. By no coincidence the main foreign investor in the pipeline is the Total Oil company while the main sponsor of park project is the Total Foundation. Economic and security issues for Rangoon are inevitably linked together. Whether the goal is "national security" or economic development, Burma's upland farmers are clearly viewed by Rangoon as

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NEWS BRIEFS

Ne Win Ill

A 1994 headline asked, "Ne Win Dead?" A question oft repeated, as diplomatic sources say he is gravely ill and his family is preparing for his death. At 87, Ne Win still acts as consult and "puppetmaster" of the SPDC, advising them on a bi-monthly basis despite his official resignation in June 1988.

Far Eastern Economic Review, 25 Jun 1988. The Nation, 9 May 1994

Election Anniversary

Marking the eighth anniversary of the National League for Democracy (NLD) victory in the 1990 elections, over 400 NLD members met at Aung San Suu Kyi's house on May 27th. During the state-sanctioned celebration Aung San Suu Kyi spoke for 20 minutes, reiterating the demand for a recognition of the elected parliament, and stating that "failure to implement the result of the 1990 elections will be an insult to and cheating of the people." NLD chairman Aung Shwe sent a letter to the SPDC on June 23 demanding that parliament be convened within 60 days, or by August 21. This marks the first deadline set by the NLD.

Burma's junta has in turn cracked down on the pro-democracy opponents, arresting at least ten people and detaining 79 others. Aung San Suu Kyi, in attempts to visit NLD members beyond Rangoon, has been stopped by the SPDC who fear she could be "at risk of bodily harm." August 8 marks the 10th anniversary of the 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations, and tensions are expected to rise approaching the date of the NLD ultimatum.

The Nation, 28 May 1998. Bangkok Post, 24 Jun 1998. Far Eastern Economic Review, 9 Jul 1998.

SPDC Defense Services has reportedly assembled a select group of soldiers for anti-riot training. Fifteen of the "most undisciplined, notorious, and unscrupulous soldiers" from each regiment under Kayah (Karenni) State-based No. 7 Tactical Operations Command were chosen to attend the 45-day course; training also began in Shan state. Several months before August 8, 1988 the same selection of soldiers were trained and used to suppress the pro-democracy demonstrators. Observers noted that such training began only after the NLD issued their ultimatum calling for the convening of parliament within 60 days.

Democratic Voice of Burma, 16 July, 1998

Asean Policy

Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan this month released a concept paper of a proposed "flexible engagement" policy in Manila. This presentation was the culmination of a month of dialogue in the Thai media, calling for the reevaluation of The Association of South East Asian Nations' (Asean) longstanding "noninterference" policy. The proposition seeks openness among Asean members on internal issues which directly affect other nations in the region. Thailand and the Philippines – which also supports the policy – are calling on Asean to take a more pragmatic role on regional issues including engagement with Burma, as well as drugs, migrant workers, refugees, environmental disasters, transnational crime and disease control.

Pipeline Project

Burma celebrated the completion of its section of the controversial Yadana gas line project on the first of July. The pipeline will start gas deliveries into Thailand later this month pending testing on the 260 km Thai portion of the line. The project is a collaborative effort between French Total, U.S. Unocal, Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, and the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) and has been widely criticized for the environmental damage and human rights abuses perpetrated in its construction in Burma.

Cont'd from 'Land & Survival,' page 5

an obstacle, and the preferred solution is to move the problem, or rather the people, from "fields" of government interest. Where the people will go and how they will survive there, is clearly a problem they have to try to solve themselves.

Conclusion

While there is extensive evidence of human rights abuses in Burma including violence, extortion and theft, there is little to systematically document the loss of a way of life. However, the warning signs are everywhere, in the huge numbers of internally displaced people, the large numbers of uplanders who have been forced by circumstances to leave their land – and ultimately in the hunger faced by so many families who have lost their original livelihood. If Burma's traditional swidden communities are to be able to maintain their way of life into the future, they need access to political power, and information about the political and economic issues that affect their lives. National laws must be established that recognize uplanders' unique land rights. Upland communities also need access to appropriate education and resources that will help them farm their limited land sustainably. The single asset that will help them the most would be a political system that is accountable to all of Burma's people, and is willing to work with diverse communities to resolve issues cooperatively. Until such a political transformation is accomplished, it seems likely that at best, upland communities will continue to exist without security or a means to defend their rights, at worst they will find themselves in Rangoon's way and end up being moved brutally out of it. Unless people organize to claim their rights, millions will find themselves facing a future without access to the land they need to survive.

E. Zeamer

'Land & Survival, notes

1 Swidden cultivation is also called shifting cultivation," "slash-and-burn," or in Burmese, *taungya*.
2 In general, extremely strict cultural taboos govern the selection of areas for cultivation, the method in which a field is cleared and cultivated, and the fallow period a field must be left before it is replanted. Ethnographies are one of the best sources for descriptions of various traditional swidden practices.
3 Interview with Karen worker from Thaton District, Burma Issues internal report, 15 Jul 1997.
4 "Dispossessed," Shan Human Rights Foundation, Apr 1998.
5 "Nyi Reh," Interviewed December, 1996. "Update on Karenni Forced Relocations" KHRG #97-01, 5 Mar 1997.
6 Interview with a Karen teacher from Papun District, Burma Issues internal Report, 7-8 Jun 1997.
7 Infrastructure was 29% of BADP spending between 1989 and 31 May 1997. New Light of Myanmar, 13 Jun 1997.
8 The 1974 Constitution (officially suspended with martial law in 1988), as well as the new constitution currently being drafted by the National Convention, name the state as the ultimate owner of all land.
9 161,601 holdings, 285,744 acres total. Statistical Yearbook 1995, Government of the Union of Myanmar, 1995.
10 Raymond L. Bryant, The Political Ecology of Forestry in Burma *1824-1994*, Hurst, 1997.
11 Bryant, p. 183.
12 "Conservation groups implicated in human rights abuses by SLORC," Watershed, Vol. 3 No. 1, Oct 1997.

'Overview,' notes

1 Despite cultural and linguistic differences, highland and lowland communities often live in close contact throughout Burma, both economically and socially. Though highland and lowland farming are discussed separately here, the highlands and lowlands communities are often participants in a single social/political system. See E.R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, University of London, 1954, 1997.
2 Leach, p. 116.
3 "ADB 30th anniversary meeting: new look, same rhetoric," *Watershed*, Vol. 3 No 1, Oct 1997.

RICE REFORMS?

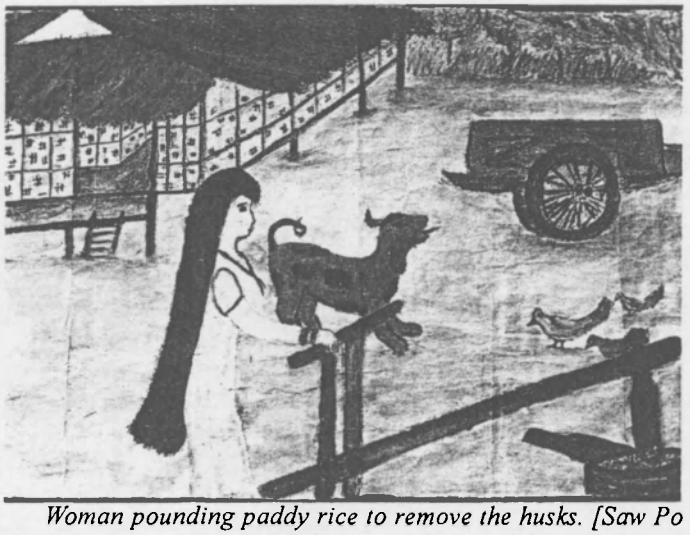
After the military took power in 1962, General Ne Win's Revolutionary Government initiated socialist-style reforms throughout Burma, including large-scale agricultural reforms designed to redistribute food and stabilize food prices. One of the most significant of these was the national rice quota system, which requires rice farmers to sell a portion of their harvest to the government, at the government's prices. Under this system, Burma's farmers pay an implicit tax: the difference between free market rice prices and government prices. This tax on farmers has become such a problem that it was hardly surprising when late in 1997, Rangoon finally announced that it will introduce "free-market" changes to the 35-year-old system.

Reforms are long overdue. In the years since the collapse of the kyat following a series of demonetizations in 1988, rice prices have risen steeply with inflation, and with them the tax burden on farmers. Like most of Burma's bureaucracies, the quota system in implementation is permeated with corruption (see also *BI* Feb 1998, "Bureaucracy Days.") Between inflation, corruption, and bad planning, the rice tax has become a substantial weight which is dragging many farmers into serious poverty.

The government in theory calculates quotas for each farm based on a formula table which considers sown acres and yield per acre. In reality, however, every farm in an area must meet the same quota (usually 12 baskets of paddy rice per acre). After selling their required quota to the government many farmers do not have enough food to survive for the coming year, and the cash payment they get from the sale is quickly reduced still more by the high rate of inflation. As a result, desperate farmers often have little choice but to try to avoid selling their full quota, and government officials in turn do what they can to force farmers to deliver, including imposing fines, shutting down rice mills, confiscating land, and even sending people to prison.

The state-run *New Light of Myanmar* last December announced: "Under the new [rice quota] plan... farmers do not have to sell the prescribed amount [to the government] but they can sell the produce under tender system initiated by the Myanma Agricultural Produce Trading, to the representatives or to the paddy purchase depots at prevailing prices. Hence... the price of rice is kept under control." The reforms explicitly address only one aspect of the quota system: the price that the farmers are paid for selling their quota of grain.

What is the reality of this change for the farmers? The government's interests have not changed – it still needs to try to rein in inflation and it still needs the same amount of rice to supply the military and civil service. Recent information received from Irrawaddy Division, Burma's "rice basket," indicates that the new system has not solved problems for farmers there. Quota amounts, for instance, will not change as is the case in Warkema Township:



Woman pounding paddy rice to remove the husks. [Saw Po Kler Htoo, Huay Kaloke Refugee Camp].

Although the government made a statement that obligatory sales of rice are no longer necessary, they are asking for a "voluntary" contribution of paddy from the farmers of Warkema Township. If the villagers are willing to sell their paddy to the government, the government will pay 30,000 kyats for 100 baskets [vs. the market price of around 45,000-50,000 kyats.] If the villagers do not agree to sell their paddy, the government will collect 10,000 kyats for every 100 baskets of paddy that the farmers produce. Proportionate contributions had to be offered by farmers who produce fewer paddy baskets. [This constitutes a fine as when the farmers sell their paddy quota they do get paid some money for their grain, but on paying the officials the cash value of rice they produce, they apparently receive nothing in return.]

A meeting was sponsored by the government with villages in Warkema Township, Irrawaddy Division in the month of April; all the headmen concerned were required to attend. The main agenda item was a directive issued requiring 20 baskets of paddy per acre to be sold to the government [or pay compensation of 10,000 kyats per 100 baskets produced]. All the headmen had to sign an agreement to that amount.

"Market" prices do not help farmers who cannot come up with enough paddy to meet their quota, as in Ein Me Township, Irrawaddy Division. Here, market prices have apparently been invoked where the government, not the farmers, stands to gain:

In 1997, the farmers of Ein Me Township were entirely without any help from the government regarding capital, investment money, expenses for seedlings and the costs of fertilizers. Even though the government declared that it was not necessary for the farmers to sell paddy to the government, in 1997 the official purchasing agents forcefully demanded that the farmers sell them 16 baskets per acre, at 30,000 kyats for 100 baskets. This year, the crops were devastated by pests and the villagers could not fulfill their sales obligations to the purchasing agents. As they could only provide a third of the quota, the farmers had to pay compensation to the government agents for the remainder of the baskets at the prevailing market rate. The villagers had to sell their buffaloes and cows in order to raise the money to pay the agents.

Amid all of this, the buying power of the kyat continues to fall:

During November 1997, the price of polished rice in Myaung Ma Township was about 1,350 kyats; now in January 1998 it is at 2,300 kyats and is expected to continue rising as high as 5,000 kyats. The price of cooking oil has risen from 400 kyats per viss to 500 kyats now. As the prices of commodities rise daily, people are impoverished and facing hunger. At this point about half the people in the village are hungry and malnourished, and only about 5% of villagers can buy enough food to eat well and live a normal life.

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The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"Any movement in Burma also affects Thailand. That's why Thailand has expressed concern over these incidents." – *Thailand's Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra on the recent crackdown on political dissidents in Burma.*

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"The Thai government has been trying to propose that this ['constructive engagement'] principle be amended somewhat and that there should be what we term 'flexible engagement.' This means that people should be able to express their views, offer advice, to reflect international thinking, and urge moderation or restraint if necessary. We feel that any policies pursued can not be seen in the context of an internal situation only, because they do have external and international ramifications." – *Thai foreign ministry spokesman Kobsak Chutikul on Thailand's engagement policy with Rangoon.*

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"The authorities of the Union of Myanmar have been exercising utmost restraint in dealing with the aggressive and confrontation[al] attitude of certain elements with the hope of inviting outside interference in the internal political development. The authorities will continue in exercising careful and measured steps to safeguard and protect the stability as well as constructive building of a system which the government has committed to build with discipline. It is regrettable however that presumptuous observation and remarks made on isolated and wrong information could lead to misunderstanding and misconception not only in bilateral relations but also in intra-ASEAN perceptions which are against the inherent and ultimate objectives of ASEAN as a whole." – *Press release, SPDC Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

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"One is a disgruntled housewife-turned-politician who desperately seeks to be popular and who covets power at all costs. The other is a self-effacing nationalist who has devoted his entire life to free his people from the shackles of apartheid imposed by a white minority." – *A junta spokesman comparing Aung San Suu Kyi with Nelson Mandela.*

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"Rice bags are heavy, of course. Anyway, I'm happy because it brings me money. I don't have to struggle like I did in Burma." – *An agricultural worker from Burma, on that the Thai government will permit migrant agricultural laborers to continue working in Thailand for another two years.*

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"The government of the Union of Myanmar has always had a deep concern for the personal security of all politicians, including Ms Suu Kyi, as there are known elements who are trying to created political unrest by putting her to some form of bodily harm." – *A statement by Burma's Canadian Embassy which was distributed in Rangoon.*

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