

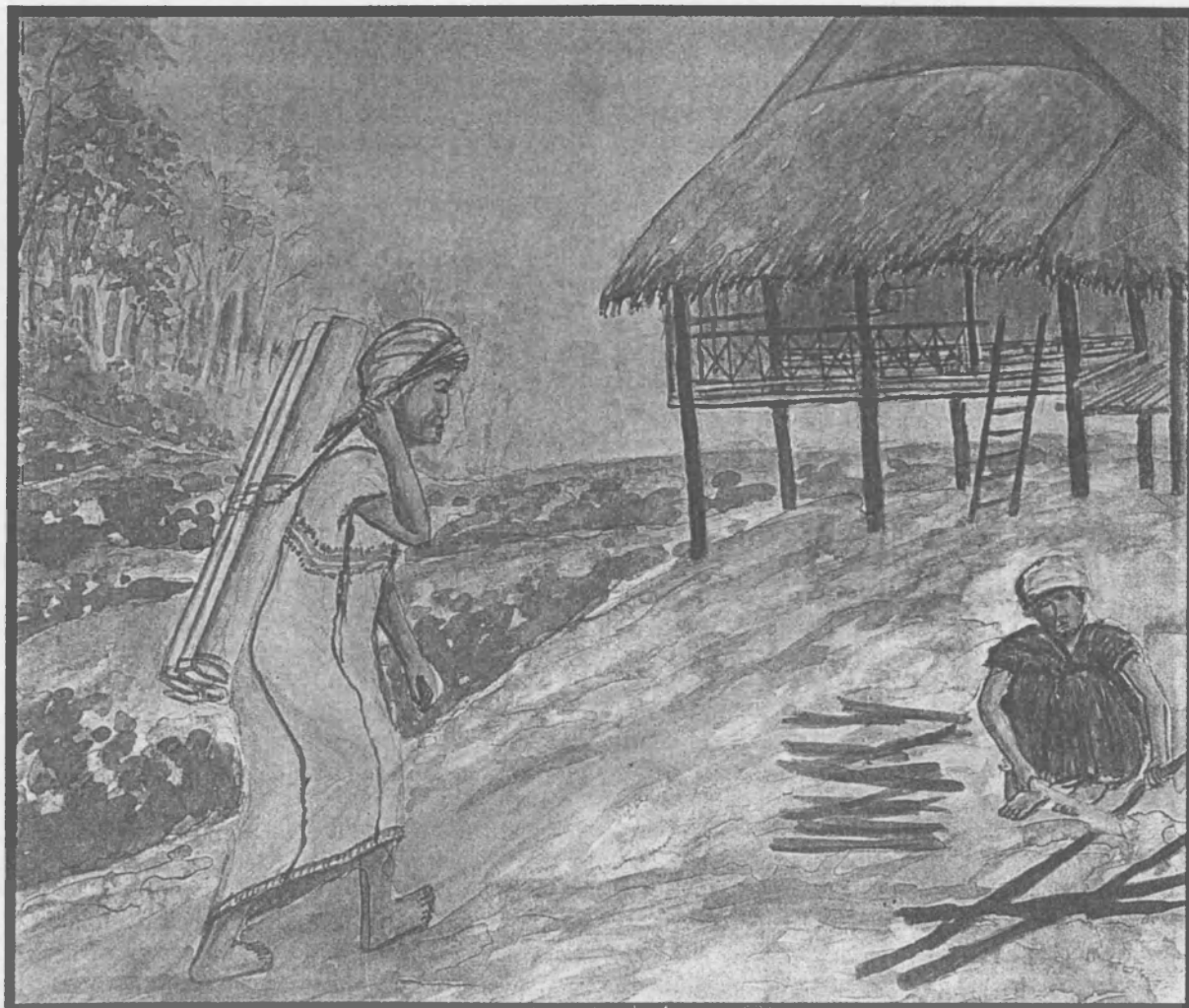
BURMA ISSUES

News, Analysis & Peoples' Stories

August 1998

Volume 8 Number 8

"I think in every country which has undergone the kind of traumatic experience that we have had in Burma, there will be a need for truth and reconciliation. I don't think that people will really thirst for vengeance once they have been given access to the truth. But the fact that they are denied access to the truth simply stokes the anger and hatred in them. That their sufferings have not been acknowledged makes people angry." – *Aung San Suu Kyi, from The Voice of Hope.*



Painting by Tin Aung Win, 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.

...
P.O. Box 1076
Silom Post Office
Bangkok 10504, Thailand
durham@mozart.inet.co.th

INSIDE

- ② CIVIL WAR: Facets of a Buddhist Army, Part 2
- ④ SOCIETY: Towards Peace, Justice & Reconciliation
- ⑥ POLITICS: Thailand & the Philippines Speak Out
- ⑦ NEWS BRIEFS: August News about Burma
- ⑧ THE LAST WORD: What Others Have to Say About Burma

FACETS OF A BUDDHIST ARMY: PART 2

"Well, for me, joining the DKBA had nothing to do with religion. I'm Christian. For me, it's like this – the KNU has fought the revolution for forty, fifty years, and after this time, what's different? What's improved for the people? I fought for the KNU for 17 years, and there were no improvements in my life, nor for the other soldiers, nor for the villagers. There were none, because the KNU has no plan, no vision. Then I heard about this new group. Frankly, I didn't know if it was going to be a better way, or not. But I knew that the KNU wasn't going anywhere. So I decided to give this new way a try, that's all." – DKBA officer, March 1998.

In my last article, I discussed how the Democratic Kayin (Karen) Buddhist Army (DKBA), which split from the Karen National Union (KNU) late in 1994 to realign with the military regime, fuse faith and militarism to achieve political goals. In this article, I will examine how they come to be seen as the cause of intra-racial hostility and religious friction.

The DKBA is the kind of organization that anything written which fails to simply condemn it outright is exposed to accusations of "apologism." By default of their alliance with Burma's military regime, for their attacks on refugee camps, and so on, they are compulsorily demonized. There is no question that the DKBA perpetrates violence on the base principle of the ends justifying the means. But the DKBA's existence is symptomatic of conditions in greater Burma, and as an alternative to mere reactionism, even cursory attempts at analysis of this organization can expand understanding of the broader milieu which created it. In this article, I contend that while religious practice is a significant part of the DKBA's *modus operandi*, it is not a cause of conflict *per se*. The KNU-DKBA conflict is in reality an intra-nationalist melee between two sides with more in common than not.

I will first examine the DKBA against its predecessor in terms of organizational continuity, and secondly consider how both sides are products of the same broad social psyche.

Continuity

"Fighting its traditional enemy, the Burma Army, had always strengthened the KNU's symbolic position regardless of its results. Putting up a fight was good enough... The idea of a Karen enemy... destroys both the belief in a united nationality as well as the familiarity of fighting a traditional enemy...." – Cusano, *Burma Issues*, March 1998.

The KNU has been engaged in an almost fifty-year long war of attrition against the Burma Army. The conflict has characteristics familiar to most of the ethnic insurgencies that have come and gone across Burma since independence. It is expressed in ethnic-nationalist symbolism and rooted in a perpetual distrust of a known and powerful nemesis. As noted in my last article, it may be valid to assume that by throwing in their lot with the "traditional enemy," members of the DKBA have abandoned the ideology to which they previously adhered as members of the KNU, and are now happily reaping the benefits of a return to mainstream Burma. I argue that this is not the case. Not only have the rank-and-file not divorced the familiar ethnocentric framework of the KNU, but furthermore they believe that the organization of which they are now members is a manifestly superior model of national autonomy to the former.

The crux of the KNU-DKBA conflict lies not with religious difference, not with ideological bones to pick, but on the contrary, in the basic fact that the KNU has failed. When after fifty years nothing has been delivered, the promise of "emancipation" has a hollow ring. The majority of DKBA regulars and administrators have come from the disenfranchised lower rungs of the KNU ladder. Marginalized and isolated over the years, their disappointment with the KNU is

genuine and reinforced by countless hard experiences. Yet, the KNU propaganda prefers to blithely characterize defectors as a rag-tag mob of traitors and criminal elements who, as a KNU spokesman put it, "committed adultery and other wrongs" (*The Nation*, 1997). Understandably, it's not comfortable for them to admit that the majority bear genuine grievances and joined the DKBA for a wide variety of reasons, in most cases both ostensibly ethical and personally advantageous.

The DKBA explicitly seeks to co-opt the claim of national unity under its own banner. Whether or not its rank-and-file have sold out the *spirit* of the revolution is contentious, but they are acutely aware of not having sold out the letter of it. In accordance with the founding principles of the revolution, they have retained their arms, never actually surrendered (merely "returned"), and they continue to demand the right to shape their own destiny. That these are genuine characteristics of their organization is reflected in the quiet non-status accorded them by the government. The DKBA are not counted among the other groups that have reached agreements with the military regime; a motley crew including the likes of the powerful former-communist ethnic Wa armies, three other KNU splinter groups and even the infamous drug lord "Khun Sa," all identified in official rhetoric as having "returned into the legal fold." The DKBA's deliberately nebulous status serves the central authorities by allowing them to keep a convenient distance from unsavory DKBA activities by claiming "non-involvement." But this is a double-edged sword. Inherent in that approach is the necessity to actually accede the DKBA a degree of autonomy, allowing it to pursue objectives which are not necessarily in line with the regime's best interests. That's to say, the limited autonomy of the DKBA is real: they know how to exercise it, and have the ideological inclination to do so.

In this light, the DKBA is in fact the continuum of a slow-dying insurgency, not the antithesis. They are revivalists. Yet their fervor for "revival" too, appears to be little more than a continuation of the precedent. In this sense, they have followed a powerful sociopolitical tendency in Burma to create something "new" within the confines of old paradigms. Authoritarian organizational structures have an easy familiarity for every side, and bring with them the same self-replicating hierarchies. Given the emphasis on the role of messianic leadership within the DKBA, itself a continuum of historical trends, top-down methodologies are particularly prone to reproduction within their organization.

Denial

"He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone...."
– John 8:7

In the ongoing intra-nationalist conflict that has stemmed from the split, both sides, and the civilians within each of their jurisdictions (with more justification than the combatants), typically hold themselves up as innocents attacked without provocation, who are sometimes forced to react out of moral necessity. In the words of a KNU spokesman, "Our soldiers and our villagers are angry. [The DKBA] attack us... [n]ow we want to give a little back to them" (*The Nation*, 1998). In such statements lurks a condition of deep-rooted denial.

At its most basic, it is simple blame laying: the people are in trouble and it's someone else's fault. Denial runs across the social landscape. It has reached new heights in the creation of the DKBA, as participants on all sides seek escape routes through which to avoid facing the impending reality that this organization represents.

For the mass of civilian victims, especially those in refugee camps, exit is sought in recognizing that the supposed destiny of the Karen race is to be "forsaken, misunderstood and perpetually vulnerable to subjugation." (Cusano, *Burma Issues*) This conviction invests the believer with the *right* to be oppressed and powerless, to thus absolve oneself of all responsibility; to accept miserable conditions as the national fate. Students of the few remaining KNU schools are versed to reiterate, as they have to me, that "the soldiers who defected are ignorant and lacking in education; they were deceived by the Burmese." The easy familiarity of the "additional enemy" as the inevitable source of all persecution provides a desperate comfort for those faced with the potentially far more confusing reality: that one's compatriots or now somehow complicit in one's continued suffering.

Soldiers themselves deny that they are contributing to the suffering of their people. Among the DKBA, this mentality occurs at both a personal and organizational level. Soldiers are able to rationalize innocence by entirely divorcing themselves from any act of aggression that they personally did not commit. They are also able to lay responsibility for suffering on the victims themselves, for not having abandoned either explicit or implicit relationships with the KNU. They can sense their own organizational momentum building and recognize with a hint of dismay that anybody not yet on board their project for national reunification has only themselves to blame, as they have surely been given ample opportunities.

The KNU, in the meantime, scrambles to hold on to what little authority it still has over civilian populations, most of them now in Thailand. Captive masses are kept in check through intimidation and disinformation. Old rebels have been forced into sheep's clothing, however their rhetoric is unrepentant and bitter. Conspiracy theories stretch far enough to include the Buddhist communities that are still the vast majority in refugee camps. Organizationally, rather than accept blame, it is easier to point the finger at "those who foster factionalism and collaboration with the enemy by using false excuses relating to religion" (KNU Statement). Simultaneously, retributory attacks on DKBA-related civilian targets are brutal reenactments of assaults by the former on refugee camps. The familiar pattern of communities fleeing into the jungle at night, paranoia, and name-calling replicates itself from one place to the next with frightening regularity.

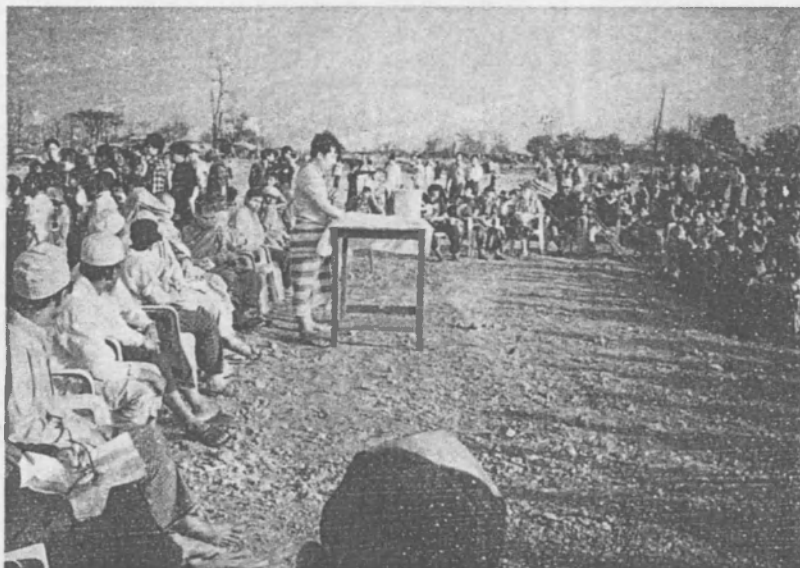
Conclusion

The DKBA is an organizational facsimile of the KNU. The former is rooted in the latter, and both in turn are fixed to the same national paradigm which holds up the Burmese as nemesis, and promises

independence and autonomy. This may be an uncomfortable reality for many people, both participants and observers to the conflict, perhaps because popular conceptions of the KNU, a self-described "liberation" organization, don't fit neatly with those of the DKBA. Yet the DKBA rank-and-file see their struggle for liberation, which most began as members of the KNU, as continuing to the present. Although this conflict has tended to be characterized as inter-religious, it is in reality intra-nationalist. Both are laying claim to the same stakes, and there is no room for compromise.

Yet, people are desperate for real alternatives. When the DKBA was first conceived, many villagers in border areas expressed hope of genuine change. They got business more or less as usual. Ulti-

mately, the KNU is fading into oblivion because the people are simply too tired to bear its burden any further. How finite is the DKBA's time? Implications for its life-span depend upon an array of factors, including the intentions and manipulations of the government, the potential resilience of the KNU, and not least of all, the behavior of the DKBA itself. A far more critical question is how finite is the life of the militarist cycle in Burma? If the demise of one militarist body have little long-run significance if it simply heralds the spawning of a clone. The real issue for the



Inter-faith prayer meeting at Huay Kaloke refugee camp, March 1998.

people is the cessation of the entire cycle.

There is hope for genuine change, although not much lies with self-proclaimed "leaders" of politico-militarist hierarchies, whose comfort with old models and whose vested interests give them little cause for genuine action. The people themselves must be the leaders of a process that goes beyond mere denial and blame-laying. And indeed, many are no longer waiting to be offered a participatory role. After the incineration of Huay Kaloke camp in March of this year, for example, an inter-faith prayer meeting was attended by hundreds of residents on parched paddy fields. It was organized by regular villagers, and brought together representatives and members of all religious congregations – Buddhist, Christian and Muslim. It was an act of remembrance for the three people who lost their lives during the assault, and it was more than that. It was an act of reconciliation among all those who attended. There was no divisive sloganeering. There were no jingoistic speeches. There was just the sound of peace: silence. Sometimes we are all too eager to get caught up in the shouting matches of small significance, and we miss the real point. But if we listen carefully, it's there to be heard.



Hsaingt Seetsar

References

- Burma Issues internal reports; personal interviews.
- Chris Cusano, "Old Flames," *Burma Issues*, Mar 1998; pp. 4-5.
- "Fifty killed as Karen raid DKBA bases," *The Nation*, 28 Mar 1998.
- "Group of KNU surrenders arms to SLORC soldiers," *The Nation*, 20 Feb 1997.
- KNU Statement, 1 Jan 1995.
- Myanmar Today, vol. 1 no. 2, Department of Information, The Government of the Union of Myanmar, May 1998.

TOWARDS PEACE, JUSTICE & RECONCILIATION

"We are not out to punish anybody, we are not out to crush or annihilate anybody, that is not our way, that is not our policy. What we want to do is to bring about national reconciliation, so that as few as people as possible will lose out from the process." – Interview with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, 15 July 1998, Rangoon.

A variety of actors concentrating on Burma, including opposition groups, the international community and nongovernmental organizations, have repeatedly called on the Burma government to hold tripartite talks with the National League for Democracy (NLD), and ethnic groups leaders. This would, it is believed, facilitate the peace process to end the civil war, strengthen the cease-fire agreements made with ethnic armed groups which are weak on political settlements, and signal the start of restructuring or reconstruction of a civil society where human rights are respected and guaranteed. During this process justice would be addressed, along with reconciliation. The future stability of Burma will depend on how the concepts of "peace," "justice," and "reconciliation" are addressed by the various players in the transition to democracy. There are two main forums which Burma could use in the transition phase dealing with justice and reconciliation issues: an international criminal tribunal, or a truth and reconciliation commission. The process the people of Burma choose to address the wounds and memories of the civil war and fight for democracy will determine how successful the transition to a peaceful society will be.

Perceiving peace to be total victory over one's enemy is the recipe for unending conflict. It is a misperception to believe peace is guaranteed when fighting ends. The cease-fire agreements that have been negotiated between the Burmese government and the armed ethnic opposition groups do not contain substantive political settlement terms and have not guaranteed peace. This is evidenced by the continued restrictions on the exercise of rights in the cease-fire areas, and the breakdown of the cease-fire with the Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front. The failure of cease-fire agreements to bring peace is the main reason the Karen National Union (KNU – Burma's oldest armed ethnic opposition group) has argued against such an agreement. However, other armed ethnic groups,

such as the Kachin Independence Organization, the New Mon State Party and the Pa-O National Organization, decided to place cease-fires and the establishment of "peace through development" first. The focus on development as the foundation for peace reflects hope that the cease-fires are the ini-

to the transfer of power to a civilian government which upholds basic human rights for the people of Burma.

Can there be reconciliation without justice? Most people equate justice with punishment. It is generally accepted that crime deserves to be punished, whatever the nature of the offence – the punishment reflecting the circumstances and degree of involvement in the crime perpetrated. However, problems arise when attempting to rigorously apply the principle of prosecution in states where gross human rights violations have occurred. But there will be no exception.

At present, there are two international criminal tribunals prosecuting persons responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law: the former Yugoslavia tribunal based in the Hague since 1991, and the Rwanda tribunal in Tanzania established in 1994. Another article would be needed to address the numerous issues arising from these tribunals; for the purposes of this article it can be said there is contention over the usefulness of this type of forum in terms of furthering the aim of reconciliation – especially when putting perpetrators on trial might jeopardize a fragile new balance of law and order. The U.N., recognizing the shortcomings of these *ad hoc* tribunals, has recently negotiated an agreement with 160 member states to create a permanent International Criminal Court (ICC).

It took five weeks of intense negotiations between representatives from the states to agree to this new permanent, global court which will try crimes of genocide and aggression, war crimes and crimes against humanity. A huge majority voted in the end for the creation of the court (120 for / against), but two major players, the U.S. and China made clear they voted against. This court can only come into existence when 60 countries ratify the treaty which could take between 2-5 years. This would most likely be the court Burma would approach in the future if it decided to take this prosecutorial direction. Due to the reluctance of the U.S.



tial stage to establishing trust among parties which will support the steps toward dialogue, peace and reconciliation

Without active armed conflict and a nationwide cease-fire, the SPDC would find it impossible to justify having a large army or military budget. Who would be its enemies? Steps must be made toward establishing a nationwide cease-fire which is monitored by the United Nations, which would supervise the withdrawal of troops, an end to martial law and the creation of conditions conducive for tripartite dialogue (among them a better balance of bargaining power), leading

and China to support the agreement, and the fact that the main way to bring a perpetrator to the court is via a Security Council resolution which any permanent member can veto (China and the U.S. are both permanent members), the hard work of creating an effective ICC is still ahead.²

If the people of Burma decide that perpetrators of war crimes should be subjected to judicial proceedings in the form of an international criminal tribunal, questions such as who should be investigated, and what is the appropriate punishment will be highly contentious. Will the tribunal investigate all violations of human rights by all parties? Often tribunals are seen as a forum of the 'victors' to vent their grievances. It must be questioned whether the 'victors' themselves have clean hands. In a civil war context no party is 'innocent' of human rights abuses. Are the leaders of insurgent groups willing to subject their own army's actions to investigation in this type of forum? The nature of judicial trials is to distinguish those who are 'guilty' and 'innocent.' This is essentially a simplistic approach to a complex situation, and can be perceived as a process of scapegoating thus perpetuating the 'us and them' war mentality. This is likely to thwart steps made in the advancement of peaceful coexistence.

Would tribunal proceedings be conducted against perpetrators at the highest levels of responsibility (such as the junta members), and the level of direct responsibility (who pulled the trigger)? What kind of punishment should be imposed on these 'perpetrators' – a fine, a term of imprisonment, life imprisonment or execution? Executions, a common form of punishment imposed on 'perpetrators' and 'collaborators' following a change over of power, do not represent an attempt at conciliation. And what about collaborators, or those who cooperated with the regime, such as members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). This group is a nominally nonpartisan civic group created by the SLORC in 1993, and is seen by many as a front political party for the military. There are an estimated 8 million USDA members in Burma, who must attend meetings and demonstrations.³ It is reported that membership is often not voluntary, township and district councils recruiting locals to fulfil member quotas when the junta opens a branch. What form of punishment should these people receive? The fear of punishment will prevent the people of Burma from uncovering an accurate representation of the facts, and is unlikely to lead Burma from a violent past to a less violent present.

This does not mean that there should not be a forum where the crimes of war and against humanity are recognized. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) are another forum which states have chosen to recognize and address gross human rights violations, most notably in Chile, Argentina, Guatemala and South Africa. The truth is seen as essential for the state in bringing to light and accounting for the past actions of either a government or, more often, of a past regime. This forum is perceived as being more approachable to citizens than an international tribunal, as the latter generally lacks sensitivity to nuances of local culture, and decisions may not have the same symbolic force as findings made within the country.

Reconciliation is essential because as noted above, any society emerging from repression has to come to terms with a substantial legacy of conflict and confusion. On the whole, perpetrators are not prosecuted in a TRC forum – particularly members of the armed forces – on the grounds that this would endanger the process of peace and reconciliation.⁴ In addition to recognizing and addressing gross human rights violations, another function of this forum is to

make recommendations on how to prevent repetition of such acts.

Aung San Suu Kyi, when questioned whether she can envisage a TRC in Burma, said she believed truth and reconciliation go together. "I think in every country which has undergone the kind of traumatic experience that we have had in Burma, there will be a need for truth and reconciliation. I don't think that people will really thirst for vengeance once they have been given access to the truth. But the fact that they are denied access to the truth simply stokes the anger and hatred in them. That their sufferings have not been acknowledged makes people angry."⁵ Suu Kyi has declined making any personal guarantees that members of the regime will not face criminal charges. This possibility has been in the minds of the generals upon relinquishment of power – the constitution being drafted by the National Convention under supervision of the junta, specifically provides that "there is no right for any penal law to provide for retrospective effect."⁶

The "perpetrators" of human rights violations
Continued on page 6

PEACE, JUSTICE & RECONCILIATION IN BURMA

PEACE will be achieved when the various ethnic groups in Burma can live together, coexist, in mutual respect; when groups can continue to effectively confront all forms of chauvinism – whether reflected as racism, narrow nationalism, religious intolerance, or gender-related bias. True peace is premised on everyone, including the poorest and most fringe of society, effectively participating in the economic, social and political processes of the country. This is a vision of a future society of peace with justice, for it ensures peoples' dignity is respected and promoted.

JUSTICE is interrelated and indivisible from the notion of peace. Without justice there can be no peace. Burma's civil war is a result of ethnic chauvinism, as the ethnic minority groups were treated with intolerance and subjected to discrimination. The massive pro-democracy demonstrations culminating in the events of 1988 were a response to severe economic and political injustice. The process of reaching a true and lasting peace must focus on bringing justice into all spheres of society; the political, social, economic and cultural spheres. Justice and peace must be addressed at the same time, and the process will be slow, considering the background of violence and brutality, and an almost total lack of understanding of public or private accountability or of civil society. A major undertaking will be shortening the gap between Burma's law and the rhetoric of human rights, good governance, and effective civil society, and the inability of the majority of Burma's population to enjoy these basic rights.

RECONCILIATION and reconstruction can begin when repression is over. The question of what reconciliation means to the people of Burma needs to be addressed. All major religious and philosophical traditions address the subject of reconciliation, and most place it above punishment, which focuses on choosing which party should be penalized and how. With the number of states dealing with the aftermath of repression and gross human rights violations, the notion of reconciliation, however, has been the subject of attention for states in transition. Any society emerging from repression has to recover from its past, and come to terms with a substantial legacy of conflict and confusion.

Continued from 'Truth,' page 5

tions — from all parties — need to participate in the truth and reconciliation process. Otherwise the goal of confronting the past, of renewing the country by looking at the truth, will be hampered. Without all parties' participation, this forum, like a criminal tribunal, will be perceived as a scapegoating process fostering resentment between various factions, as not all grievances will be aired or accorded the same acknowledgment. Without a true understanding of what everyone has suffered during the civil war, forgiveness, which is a fundamental aspect toward working for peaceful coexistence, will be elusive. Suu Kyi has said that, "once the truth has been admitted, forgiveness is far more possible. Denying the truth will not bring about forgiveness, neither will it dissipate the anger in those who have suffered."

The question of amnesty is contentious. Amnesty is the act of grace or forgetting. In South Africa, the TRC offers amnesty for political acts. This means that acts by a political organization or member of security forces committed within the scope of duties and authority, shall not be held criminally or civilly liable for their offence(s). This amnesty is given on conditions of full exposure, especially concerning the political ob-

jective of the acts. The idea is to create as much opportunity as possible to bring the past, and truth of the past, out in the open to help the important process of cleansing. Although offering amnesty seems a good approach rationally, it is an emotionally difficult process and is a major issue of dissent in South Africa. An officer of the South African TRC commented on the difficulty of amnesty: "They [the perpetrators] committed gross illegalities, but if they tell the whole truth, and if they can prove they did it for political reasons, then they will walk away."⁸

There will be an understandable reluctance among some victims in Burma to forgive. People in the civil war areas have endured systematic human rights violations and indignities. When asked about their feelings toward the Burma Army and government, newly arrived asylum seekers from Papun township in Karen State, expressed anger familiar to many Burmese people. An Karen man said "they are committing gross injustice. They are supposed to govern well, but why do they oppress the people? I do not want to be under their rule, honestly not." His village has been burnt down, food stores destroyed and livestock killed, creating a severe food shortage. A woman, recounting the burning of her village along with rice

stores, and her forced portering experience, said, "I feel greatly hurt by their [Burma Army] intrusions into our homes, but we are at a loss to express ourselves in words. Even though we are very much offended, we cannot say anything about it. We will not stay to see them again, we will not endure any harm from them again, ever!" A village headman, who had seen his village burned, and who had been arrested and physically tortured, remarked, "I do not want to see them [Burmans] again, ever."

Forgiveness will be a huge issue for the people of Burma to work through. Without an element of forgiveness, wounds cannot heal, and people will not be able to peacefully coexist. Even if people are not fully reconciled with one another, it is better that space be created within which dialogue and mutual reciprocity can take place to discuss contentious issues without resorting to violence. Building peace means learning how to disagree without treating one another disrespectfully. This depends on all parties attitude toward one another. Without this space for dialogue, intolerance and discrimination will again manifest itself in violence, and the people of Burma will continue to live in fear.

Cont'd next page..

THAILAND AND THE PHILIPPINES SPEAK OUT

The U.S. and other western countries continue to lead in the criticism of the Burmese regime. Now, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member countries Thailand and the Philippines have also spoken out strongly in support of change in Burma.

At the June ASEAN ministerial meeting, Thailand made a strong call for a reevaluation of ASEAN's long-standing "noninterference" policy. Though the proposal was rejected by a majority of member nations, it was agreed that ASEAN states should be more open in affairs affecting the region. Thus, Thailand's proposed approach, termed "flexible engagement" was softened to a policy of "enhanced interaction." The foreign ministries of the Philippines and Thailand have made use of this policy to call for change as tensions continue to rise in Burma.

On the eve of the 10th anniversary of Burma's brutally suppressed pro-democracy uprising, Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra called for an end to the "impasse" between the government and opposition forces. He called for a "provisional agreement" that would provide for a political system that is accept-

able to the Burmese people and the international community.

Sukhumbhand made his plea on the behalf of needy Burmese who have not been able to benefit from international assistance since many countries withdrew aid after the 1988 massacre. He also warned that without talks the current situation could lead to problems which might affect Thailand.

Filipino Foreign Minister Domingo Saizon went a step further, in calling for a "bloodless popular uprising." Using the example of the Philippine transition to democracy, he called on Burmese activists and students outside of the country to return and fight for change.

"Of course, you risk life and limb but that's part of the process," he said. The 1983 Philippine uprising was triggered by the assassination of popular opposition leader Benigno Aquino after he returned from self-exile in the U.S.

Thais and Filipinos were among the activists detained in Burma for passing out pro-democracy leaflets in Rangoon this month, and their respective governments pressure played a significant role in their release.

Saizon emphasized that negotiations within ASEAN were key to resolving the situation and would be important in dealing with other issues in Burma.

"We are gratified that Myanmar took positive action with respect to [the release of the detainees] and we hope that similar positive action could be taken in response to other pressing matters," he said in reference to the fourth standoff between Aung San Suu Kyi and the junta.

Burma's military government has reacted strongly to criticism of its domestic policy. "Myanmar is a sovereign nation. Myanmar will not allow interference in her internal affairs," read commentaries in all three of the official newspapers. It has dismissed Thailand and the Philippines as "lackeys" of the West bloc "engaged in a propaganda war interfering with others internal affairs" with the end of destroying the united regional grouping.

Bangkok Post, 28 Jul 1998. The Nation, 29 Jul 1998. Bangkok Post, 8 Aug 1998. Bangkok Post, 16 Aug 1998. The Nation, 18 Aug 1998.

...Cont'd from previous page

Peace, justice, reconciliation and forgiveness are interrelated and indivisible for attaining future peaceful coexistence. The process taken during the transformation period is important for determining the direction of the readjustment phase so that good governance, civil society, democratic participation, security and human rights are sustainable. For the people of Burma, the past will never be forgotten. The people will have to consider what process will best alleviate the painful memories and heal wounds. If it is more important to have a forum recognizing guilt and the need for compensation, as well as a more accurate representation of the facts in the nation's future history books, then a truth and reconciliation process may serve this purpose better than judicial proceedings. If the population of Burma does not undergo a truth and reconciliation process which addresses peace, justice and forgiveness with the aim of being able to coexist and confront communism constructively, then Burma may return to violence and further oppression. To move from a violent past to a less violent present needs the participation and support of all parties.

❖ Coakley

Endnotes, "Truth, Reconciliation"

- 1 R Rayfuse & C Cody, "Genocide In Rwanda: Legal Responses of International Community and Rwandan Government," *Human Rights Defender* (Australia) pp. 10-12. Rayfuse and Cody comment that the difficulties of establishing the Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and ensuring its effective operation have been considerable: communications and logistical problems; international support and cooperation has been slow; the Rwandan Government has been accused of being less than cooperative with both the investigators and prosecutors in allowing and assisting investigations and in providing evidence and witnesses to the Tribunal; administration has also been problematic. On the last day of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, 24 Apr 1998, Rwanda publicly executed people convicted in the participation of the genocide acting outside the Tribunal's jurisdiction. The European Union, Canada and the High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, all expressed concern.
- 2 I Black, "Putting the dictators in the dock," *Guardian Weekly*, 21 Jun 1998.
J Hooper, "US plans to thwart war crimes court," *Guardian Weekly*, 28 Jul 1998.
- 3 Correspondence with the Burma Lawyers' Council, 7 May 1998. Members of the USDA have been accused of being instrumental in the attack on Suu Kyi's motorcade in November 1996, which resulted in the regime severely restricting her movements for her own "security." This is the reason given during the latest standoff between Suu Kyi and the SPDC (during the ASEAN summit at the end of July) after her car was blocked 22 kms south of Rangoon on the road to Nyaundon, Irrawaddy Division, to meet with supporters.
- 4 Bronkhorst, n. 9-10.
- 5 "Hope for the enemy," *The Nation*, 8 Jun 1997 (extracts from interviews with Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, Conversations with Alan Clements).
- 6 The National Convention, Article 30, published in *The New Light of Myanmar*, 23 Apr 1994.
- 7 Suu Kyi, *The Nation*, 8 Jun 1997.
- 8 A O'Hagen, "To forgive - and not forget," *Guardian Weekly*, 4 Jan 1998.
- 9 Burma Issues, video transcript of interviews with new arrivals from Papun township, 1997.

NEWS BRIEFS

Military purchases

Jane's Defence Weekly (JDW) reported that a "small-arms" factory has opened in Burma, and manufacturing begun. It was built by Chartered Industries, a Singapore government-owned company. Assault rifles produced were reportedly issued to soldiers guarding the Yadana pipeline.

JDW also reported that the Burmese embassy in Bangkok is operating a major signals intelligence station, with similar capabilities in Bangladesh. The station targets international/satellite telephone conversations, faxes, email, and radio broadcasts. The Embassy of the Union of Myanmar denied the accusation stating, "Whatever antennas used and seen on the roof of the embassy's military, naval and air attache office in Bangkok are merely ordinary TV antennas and this can be confirmed even by the man-on-the-street." JDW printed aerial shots of the equipment.

According to JDW, earlier this year, Burma bartered rice for 20 artillery pieces from North Korea, currently in the grip of a serious famine. The deal was the first since the two countries had broken off relations in 1983. It speculates that China brokered the deal.

Bangkok Post, 24 Jul 1998. *The Nation*, 30 Jul & 7 Aug 1998. *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 5 Aug 1998.

8.8.98

Celebrations and demonstrations marking the 10th anniversary of the August 8, 1988 pro-democracy uprising in Burma were held in Tokyo, London, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Dhaka, New Delhi, Washington, Phoenix, Boston and a small southeastern Burmese town, where 40 individuals attempted to draw support at local schools. These anti-government demonstrators dispersed "peacefully and disappointedly," according to a junta spokesman.

Bangkok Post, 8 Aug 1998.

Aung San Suu Kyi goes camping

Aung San Suu Kyi began her most recent standoff with the SPDC on August 12. Setting out on the road to Bassein on a fourth attempt to visit supporters outside of Rangoon, she was again prevented by a roadblock from traveling further. She has insisted that she will not be moved until all political prisoners are released. Her third attempt to travel also resulted in a standoff as Suu Kyi refused to turn back to Rangoon, instead patiently waiting for the bridge to reopen that she might cross. As food and water were refused her by the

military guards, Suu Kyi's last stand resulted in dehydration, and ended with her forced abduction home. This time, Suu Kyi packed a mini-van prepared to handle any situation, especially another standoff. As expected she again sits on the road to Bassein, where regardless of the military's new desire to provide every "camping" comfort, including imported cakes, soda, a portable toilet, a picnic table and chairs, a beach umbrella, she refuses to leave her van. In sickness and in good spirits, as reported by the NLD, she awaits the verdict.

Meanwhile back in Rangoon, NLD Chairman Aung Shwe met with SPDC Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt for one hour on August 18. Offers for similar talks were turned down on August 7, on grounds that Aung San Suu Kyi was not invited. The junta made much of the meeting in state-controlled press and television, calling the meeting "fruitful," while the NLD claimed that the meeting did not constitute dialogue as the opposition party had democratically voted not to engage in dialogue with the military unless Aung San Suu Kyi participated. Neither side revealed the content of their discussion.

Bangkok Post, 19 Aug 1998.

18 detained in Rangoon

Eighteen foreign activists were detained after distributing a leaflet with a "goodwill message" in solidarity with pro-democracy forces in Burma on the 10th anniversary of the brutally suppressed pro-democracy uprising. The six Americans, three Thais, two Filipinos, three Malaysians, three Indonesians and one Australian spent five days in a police guest house before being sentenced to five years imprisonment with hard labor. Under pressure from the activist's respective countries the Burmese government agreed to deportation under the conditions that the activists must never return to engage in political activities in Burma, they must not cause unrest in Burma and they would have five years added to a future sentence if they violated Burmese law again. The day following the sentence they arrived in Bangkok to a hero's welcome. The leaflet they distributed read: "We are your friends from around the world. We have not forgotten you. We support your hopes for human rights and democracy. 8888 - Don't Forget - Don't Give Up."

The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"I think right now a lot of people are wondering where their next meal is coming from." – *A Rangoon-based diplomat, on the rising prices of rice and other commodities.*

...

"The overwhelming majority of the people in Myanmar are not obsessed with politics. They do not see freedom solely in terms of the right to vote periodically and demonstrate and express political views publicly. They care more for the basic rights such as security and safety of their lives and properties, a decent job which will help put enough food on the table for their families and also a decent place for them to live which the government is in the process of trying to fulfill its obligation to the nation." – *Lt-Gen Hla Min during the press briefing concerning the detainment of 18 foreign activists caught distributing leaflets in Rangoon on August 9.*

...

"I am confident that we will achieve democracy because the tide of history is with us." – *Aung San Suu Kyi in an August interview with the BBC.*

...

"We were treated like kings and queens. We were given everything that we could possibly have wanted. We were kept in police headquarters with fans, air conditioning, food and anything we could possibly want.... What is horrible is

that we could leave after six days but people in Burma that perhaps commit the exact same crime could be sentenced to life or could be killed." – *American University student Sapna Chatpar describing the conditions for the American members of the group of 18 foreign activists held in Rangoon for distributing leaflets.*

...

"We were separated by nationality at first and put into different rooms. There were rats running about in our room and we were watched 24 hours a day by police. There was no running water, nothing to read, no books and they wouldn't give me a newspaper." — *Thai activist Sawat Uppahad, one of the 18 held in Rangoon, describing of the Thai activists under detention. They were united with the other activists at a police "guest house."*

...

"It is altogether shameful, if ingenuous, to cite human values as an excuse for autocratic practices and denial of basic rights and liberties." – *Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's deputy prime minister*

...

"This was not an appropriate time for a visit." – *SPDC General Than Shwe's reply to an offer made in early August by an emissary of U.N. Secretary General, Kofi Annan, to mediate talks between the Burmese authorities and the NLD.*

BURMA ISSUES
PO BOX 1076
SILOM POST OFFICE
BANGKOK 10504
THAILAND

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

PRINTED MATTER • AIR MAIL