BURMA ISSUES

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"In the 1990 election it is true that the NLD got the most votes, but it is also true that the Shan had the second largest vote and the Rakhine the third. Both of these are ethnic minorities. Even in a democracy the ethnic minority issue must be tackled." – *Bertil Lintner, speaking at "The Forum on 'The Future of Burma: Relations with Regional Communities,'" Bangkok, 25 Aug 1998.*

"Porters," Eh Htee Kaw, Huay Kaloke Refugee Camp.

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

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HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION: A TRANSITIONAL AGENDA

Two previous articles this year offered a critique of contemporary human rights documentation in the Burmese peace movement (*Burma Issues* Feb 1998, May 1998). Each illustrated that while documentation is prevalent, the use of the information it generates is largely limited by legal or technical models which discourages popular participation in the human rights information process. However, such a critique is not complete without proposing an alternative, based not on extracting individual bits of information, but instead on developing avenues of feedback and education which may help people caught in Burma's conflict to build a grassroots movement for social justice. What are the prospects for turning human rights reporting into human rights education?

Engaging people in dialogue about human rights issues is not difficult, particularly people whose rights are in jeopardy and whose lives may be at stake. Required is an ideological leap on the part of human rights organizations, a broad jump across the chasm of experience that divides human rights as a *foreign* category and human rights as a *native* category. As foreign, human rights is a formal set of legal concepts enshrined in the instruments of the United Nations. Working from this objective, finite set, human rights education becomes a straightforward didactic process, teaching people what their rights are under international or local law. Naturally, there are limitations on the effectiveness of this approach, particularly in long-running and violent conflicts. To people struggling for bare survival in Burma's war zones, there seems to be little relationship between abstract ideals of human rights and the routine degradation they endure.

On the other hand, human rights as a native category is intrinsic to people's experience. Rather than present an external body of legal ideas, education can help people articulate a set of rights by promoting reflection and analysis of their struggle for peace and dignity. Its method is essentially evocative, not didactic, and seeks to place individual and communal experience within the framework of broader social issues. Following are three examples of how a human rights education program based on popular experience might use concrete issues to develop both awareness and action at the grassroots level.

1. Economic Change

Parts of rural Burma are in an era of sweeping economic change. The taxation, disrupted production and outright piracy of the rural economy is well attested to by conventional human rights reporting. Land confiscation, conscription, forced labor, high crop taxes, and village relocation all wreak havoc on the rural economy. What has yet to be studied in detail is the gradual replacement of individual subsistence economies with cash economies demanded by civil war conditions. What are the mechanisms of change? What are the implications of this change? What are the social and cultural ramifications which people have to deal with? How does it affect the rural demography? These questions can only be answered by people living through this change, those who will feel its impact for the rest of their lives. Grassroots human rights education can engage people in dialogue about economic change and even suggest steps to correct or forestall some of the undesirable effects. The dialogue can become practical by leading to economic cooperatives or other development programs which seek to address economic injustice at the root, and by engaging communities in an enlightened process of building strong counter-institutions to replace routines of exploitation. This form of human rights education is extremely powerful because it speaks to the rural economy and the agricultural issues which shape lives.

2. Chauvinism

If one accepts that Burma's crisis is rooted in ethnic conflict among people who don't want to share the same national identity, then clearly nothing will improve until ethnic and religious chauvinism is brought into the open. Conventional human rights has at times worsened discrimination in Burma by inadvertently validating stereotypes of the aggressive intruders and the meek, innocent victims. Yet, people must confront their own prejudices about the races inhabiting Burma and the history of their interaction. People must confront their feelings about their neighbors with a view to reconciling the wrongs of the past and coexisting peacefully in the future. Ethnic nationalism must be distinguished from beneficial patriotism. Racial, religious, and linguistic discrimination must be replaced at all levels by a willingness to understand and accommodate one another. The challenge is to transform that which is strange and threatening into something familiar and valuable. Well-designed programs to create interracial and inter-religious understanding can operate through schools, adult education programs and through religious institutions.

3. Vision for Peace

People living under the burden of civil war suffer the twin indignities of communal insecurity and exclusion from the political process. The isolation and absence of voice is one of the most striking conditions afflicting Burma's civil war populations. That everyone is seeking the antidote of peace may be a foregone conclusion, but little attention has been paid to the nature of that peace. Peace means different things to different people: victory over the enemy; a return to a mythical, idealized past; economic development; simply being left alone in quiet isolation. The issue of peace on the national level must be rigorously discussed and dissected at the communal level, taking into full account the economic and cultural challenges facing Burma. This is a profound approach to human rights, for it seeks to implement the basic right of all peoples to express their political beliefs and to create a world worth living in.

This agenda challenges the current human rights infrastructure. For one, it demands building deeper relationships between human rights organizations and communities. To extract information requires a visit only long enough to suit the investigator's interview schedule. By comparison, community education takes a lifetime. It also requires a broadening of human rights skills and activities. Dialogue on these three topics can not take place in a vacuum, but must become the core of formal and non-formal education efforts, whether taking place in schools or in the context of development projects addressing communities' basic economic needs. By the same token, the human rights education approach is also a challenge to relief and development activities which have traditionally eschewed political dialogue, favoring the belief that economic development holds the greatest promise for long-term benefit. By integrating a human rights education agenda into existing programs, traditional development work should guards against the danger of reinforcing that causal injustice which creates poverty.

To embrace the educational approach is to recognize and seek to address some of the weaknesses in the current state of human rights documentation: that people are portrayed as passive victims, that the agenda is beyond the community's control, that it uses an ineffective documentation model, that it involves too few local participants, and that it offers few constructive solutions to the search for peace. Human rights education opens up a whole new world of possibilities for both organizations working on human rights documentation as well as relief and development, and more importantly, for Burma's people struggling for dignity within a violent conflict.

❖ Chris Cusano

BURMA'S DILEMMA: BACK & FORTH OVER BORDER TRADE

A country rich in natural resources but poor in industrial development, Burma has become increasingly dependent on international trade for essential manufactured and industrial goods. Maintaining its reserves of foreign currency has become a crucial but difficult task, as the need for manufactured goods has outpaced the Burmese ability to export teak, rice, prawns, pulses and other agricultural products and natural resources. In its attempts to maintain positive trade relationships with neighboring countries and at the same time shift the imbalance of trade in their favor, the ruling junta vacillates between extremes of deregulation and sweeping trade restrictions. Rangoon has yet to find a position on trade that is beneficial to themselves and the citizens of Burma.

The ruling junta vacillates between extremes of deregulation and sweeping trade restrictions.

On September 15, the junta reopened the Myawaddy/Mae Sot border trading point on the Thai-Burma border having, closed major trading points along its Thai and Indian borders nine months earlier. With a huge trade imbalance last year – exports earnings are currently at US$ 800 million, with spending almost double that at US$ 1,500 million – the government closed down most official border trade, including the point at Myawaddy, in hopes that it would be able to shore up its much reduced foreign currency reserves.[1] Despite the closure in November, the nation's reserves still remain low - reported at between US$ 100-150 million or equivalent of about one month's exports.[2] Now officials are attempting to remedy their monetary problems with another radical switch, again allowing a greater volume of trade.

The SPDC has instituted several new measures including a new trade system in the hope that they can eliminate the trade deficit. At the center of the new system is the stipulation that all trade between Burma and the neighboring nations of China, Bangladesh, India, Laos and Thailand take place in dollars, in the hopes of bringing in an estimated $200 million a year. This condition has been agreed to by Thailand but is being contested by Burmese businessmen who fear their business with China and India - countries traditionally unwilling to trade in dollars - will suffer. In addition, Burma's new regulations state that traders cannot import goods worth more than the value of their exports. Companies who export less than $50,000 per year will also not be allowed to import goods. Import bans on fresh fruit, alcohol, beer, MSG, biscuits, canned food and soft drinks have also been levied to promote the use of local products and correct the trade imbalance.[3]

Thailand has, for several months, been urging Burma to open the border and continue trade, but many merchants on the Thai side of the border continue to be skeptical about the consistency of the Burmese trade policy. Though Myawaddy is located in the politically sensitive Karen State, it is nevertheless important as the closest trading point to Rangoon. However, the SPDC has allowed the Myawaddy border point to remain open only sporadically over the year since the completion of the Thai-Burma "friendship bridge" linking the two countries. Burma has remained noncommittal about how long the checkpoint will stay open this time. Between continued fighting with the Karen National Union (KNU), territorial conflicts with Thailand and domestic economic difficulties, the Burmese have been quick to close the checkpoint leaving Thai traders in the lurch. While Thailand has historically benefited from the trade surplus between the two countries and trade is desired with Burma, traders are also less than enthusiastic about trading in dollars after the fall of the baht. It is thought that new regulations may cut Thai trade by half and encourage smuggling.

The months of closure had, perhaps, the greatest affect on the Burmese citizens. Over the first half of this year the value of trade with Thailand has fallen by 31.8%.[4] As Thailand remains the source of many essential daily products, reduction in border trade has caused a scarcity of these items and consequently a rise in inflation throughout Burma. Inflationary pressures have, consequently, contributed to the rise in cooking oil and rice prices as well as those of imported goods over the nine months since the trade reduction. "I think right now a lot of people are wondering where there next meal is coming from," commented a Rangoon based diplomat.[5] While the official currency rate remains at 6 Kyat to the dollar, black market currency trading has seen the Kyat fall to over 400 Kyat to the dollar an almost four fold drop since the end of 1996, a trend that has been encouraged by the government practice of printing more money.

While international trade played a major role in the development of other Southeast Asian nations Burma suffered from years of isolationist policy until the SLORC took power in 1988. Industrialization has been high on the agenda of the SLORC/SPDC since they initiated a more "liberal" economic policy in 1989 but things have changed only moderately. The volume of commodity exports still has not reached the level obtained in the early 1960's just before the overthrow of the parliamentary regime by the military and industrial development has remained stagnant. Manufacturing accounts for only 8% of the GDP and 10% of the merchandise exports, and the prospects for sudden change aren't good. The majority of outside investment in the country has been focussed on hotels and the oil and gas industry As 39% of international investment comes from economically pinched Southeast Asian nations, many projects have been put on hold.[6]

Most of the economic indicators cited by international sources point overwhelmingly at a bleak future for trade in Burma. However, as with most things in Burma the situation isn't as clear cut as it seems. Burma remains firmly under the control of the military regime whose own economic figures, due both to the intentional veiling of the situation and ineptitude, are highly suspect. Black market and "unofficial" trade both remain a large part of the economy and are almost impossible to track statistically. Recently, however, sources high in the Rangoon government have confirmed concerns about the economy. Recently a seminar was held on the economic situation in Burma specifically regarding the high inflation, insufficient rice production, budget deficit and trade deficit. SPDC Secretary 1, Khin Nyunt addressing the attendees, attributed the weakness of the Burmese economy in part to the "imbalance of export and import with the latter exceeding the former... the State earns less foreign exchange with the result that it is weak in foreign exchange savings and reserves."[7] As the Burmese people continue to face increasingly harsh conditions, it remains to be seen if the military government can produce the much needed foreign cash in time to rescue its failing economy.

E. Miller

1 *Bangkok Post*, 14 Feb 1998
2 *Bangkok Post*, 8 Aug 1998
3 *Bangkok Post*, 11 Apr 1998.
4 *Bangkok Post*, 7 Sep 1998.
5 *Bangkok Post*, 22 Aug 1998.
6 *Bangkok Post*, 11 Feb 1998.
7 *Golden Myanmar* vol. 5 #1, 1998.

DRUGS & POLITICS AT THE VILLAGE LEVEL

In Burma, drug smugglers are involved in government at all levels – national, state, township and village administration. Much has been written on the SPDC's involvement in the drug trade. At the national level, two opium warlords and drug smugglers, Khun Sa and Lo Hsing-Han, surrendered to the government and have since used their connections with the government in Rangoon, to become businessmen. My own village in northern Burma illustrates how one community has been affected by the involvement of drug smugglers in politics and government at the local level.

I grew up in a small Shan village of about 800 households in Northern Shan State. Most of the villagers are farmers, some are traders and a handful are government servants. The main ethnic groups are Shan, Chinese and ethnic Palaung. The farmers grow rice, beans, and corn; and in the mountains nearby there are a lot of tea and opium poppy fields. The Chinese first came to settle there during China's Cultural Revolution; most of them are now traders.

When I was young, the SSA (Shan State Army) and PSIA (Palaung State Independence Army) operated in the area; in the village itself there was also a well-established Burma Army training camp. In 1991 the PSIA surrendered to the government, and in 1992 the SSA made a cease-fire agreement with the government. Under the cease-fire agreement, the SSA was permitted to organize certain kinds of development projects, but the SPDC commander was to remain the decision-maker in the area. Before 1991, people supported the cease-fire. They had suffered under civil war for a long time, and people hoped that once peace was established the cease-fire group would begin working on development. The leaders themselves had said that for the sake of the people and true peace we must agree to a cease-fire; this is the first step for the future. Since then, however, people have come to question the cease-fire groups, because they have not seen any of the promised development in their villages. Many people feel that the cease-fire has simply allowed a small group of people to get rich. In spite of the cease-fire, most of the villagers still have to leave the village to find jobs elsewhere: in Thailand, at the jade or ruby mines in Burma, and a few have gone to the cities.

I spent most of my childhood in "Murng" village until I left in 1985-86. I studied in Murng until I passed 8th standard in 1985. The village head man at that time was one of three university degree holders from our village. He was elected headman of the village after graduating from university.

The headman and the villagers worked together to organize development projects in Murng village; we received no help from the government. Our village has a middle school, maternity clinic, a market, a 30-bed hospital, hydropower electricity and a hydropower water pump for the hospital. The hospital had a doctor, two nurses and a pharmacist. All the villages in the area depended on this small hospital and it saved many lives; sometimes even wounded Burmese soldiers received treatment there.

Funds were raised for village projects in many ways: the villagers themselves donated money; the village held traditional dances, or sold food during holidays and festivals; and there was a township-level lottery which was organized by the headman and some of the villagers. The hospital was built while I was in 6th standard in 1983. As a student, I participated in a stage show to raise money for building the hospital.

> He said, "...I am not here to listen to what you like or don't like."

The headman himself organized an electricity project for the village. The villagers constructed a small earth dam and set up a hydroelectric dynamo. While people were working on the dam, the headman himself made multiple trips back and forth between the village and the larger towns of Lashio and Mandalay to purchase the proper supplies and equipment as the villagers' design for the project took shape. After that the village had electricity for three hours a day, between 6 and 9 p.m. The young people studied traditional and modern music, and classes were organized to teach Shan literature. In the evenings, people would often meet at the headman's house or at friends' houses to talk about village affairs.

I remember that time as a peaceful time in my village. There was little need to depend on the township administration because the village took care of most people's needs, including education and healthcare, and everyday goods were available in the market. The social system within the village gave some assistance to the poor, and rich people took more responsibility in social affairs. Sometimes resistance groups asked for some support or money, the headman and the wealthier families simply took care of it themselves without bothering anyone else in the village. Poor people only had to take care of their personal affairs.

In 1992, I left Burma to try to find work in Thailand; it wasn't until 1996 that I had a chance to return to Murng village. Though I arrived quite late, my family told me I should go immediately to the new headman's house to register as a guest in the village. My grandmother told me not to forget or the headman would find fault with the family. After dinner, I went for a walk around the village. The first thing I noticed was how dark it was; there were no lights on in the houses. Some villagers were heading to the western end of the village and I followed them to the edge of town, which was brighter with electric light. I could occasionally hear shouting from far away. When I got there I saw there were several kinds of gambling going on. The electricity was from a diesel generator. Not far from the makeshift casino was a shop where many addicts were gathered in the darkness as people sold and took drugs. The gatherings I remembered, where groups of young people came together in the evening to sing songs, learn the "To" and Bird dances, make and eat Kaw Soi noodles, Kaw Lung and other traditional Shan foods, or just talk together – had disappeared.

Later, villagers told me that the drug shop was owned by the new village headman and managed by his agents. Whenever competing drug traffickers showed up, he just called the police from the neighboring town and had them arrested. There were a lot of thieves, drug smugglers, addicts and beggars. There were hardly any young men around. Most of the villagers were women or old people. People told me they did not want their children to be exposed to drugs, so they tried to arrange for them to stay in other places. Since I'd left, one of my friends had died of a heroin overdose.

The hospital had only one nurse left, and so people did not depend on it. People had started buying medicine on their own and they took it without knowing anything about the medicine or the disease. This contributed to a high death rate. Since I'd left, the entire situation had turned upside down.

Most of these changes came about after the village headman changed. Personally, I know the new headman quite well. His name was "X'an," he was an ex-Kuomintang Chinese soldier, now officially a tea trader. When he first settled in the village many years ago, he moved opposite my house. Within five years, he'd bought himself a truck and two acres of

land, and built himself a big house. He could not read or write any Burmese, and villagers suspected that he himself was a drug addict.

When I was in 6th standard, a man being pursued by Burmese soldiers because they thought he was a rebel soldier, dashed into X'an's house to escape. According to the story the villagers told, the soldiers ran in looking for him, but found instead a pile of heroin and a lot of timber. In the village at that time only two people had permission to log in the area, and to send timber to the mines in Namtu; X'an was not one of them. However, no action was taken against him for drug trafficking or illegal logging. People said he had bribed the military officers to avoid prosecution.

I asked people how he got to be headman, and they told me about what had happened in the village. At a time when the previous village head was away from the village, the local Burma Army commander and his soldiers came and called a meeting in the marketplace in the center of the village. He announced, "I am here for a new village head." The villagers were very surprised. He continued "I have decided on a new head man, and I am not here to listen to what you like or don't like." He announced, "Your new head man is X'an." In the past, this particular commander used to visit X'an quite often and had a good relationship with him. People said that X'an had bribed the commander in order to get the position.

The current regime allows drug traffickers to be involved in politics and administration through corruption. If the situation stays the same, what will the future look like for Murng village? When the SSA was fighting the Burmese they were supported by the villagers. The decision to sign a cease-fire agreement was supposedly based on the wish of the people for peace. When local armed groups signed cease-fire agreements with the SPDC, they were given some authority in the cease-fire areas to work on development and improve conditions for the people. Have the cease-fire groups upheld their responsibility to the people for positive change? What is their role now that the cease-fire agreement has been signed and the people continue to suffer?

In the past, this village didn't look to other groups to implement changes; the community worked together to solve its problems. Murng village used the power of people and community organizing to develop the village and improve people's lives. The people still have the power to make a difference. The cease-fire groups are still responsible to the people to work on improving their lives; the people must continue to remind them of this fact, and tell them that they have the authority under the cease-fire agreements to implement change. However, many of those who signed the cease-fire agreements are now content to concentrate on their own affairs without worrying about their responsibility to the people. If the people rely on the cease-fire groups and on their political leaders to improve the situation perhaps nothing will change. When development took place in the village previously it was due to the efforts of the village people. It depends on the villagers to realize it's up to them to make positive changes in the future.

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S.W.

Note: Names in this narrative have been changed, as indicated by the first use in quotations.

TOTAL "SUPPLIES" ARMY WITH BICYCLES

The following is a translation of two articles that recently appeared in Kwe K'lu Sgaw Karen language newspaper, 16 Aug 1998.

"Don't come & sell any more: The soldiers don't want to carry any more of Total's oil"

"T'bah heh hsar lerr t'gay : Thuht phoe t'ehdoht wi lerr htohterh a'thoe lerr bah," p. 15

On July 26, a Burmese national living in Thailand met with a Burma Army soldier at Nat Aye Taung village, to whom he sold a bicycle. The Burma Army soldier showed him scars on his shoulders and back and told him, "If you have any pity on us then you won't come and sell bicycles like this any more. I beg you."

"Each time that you come to sell bicycles, all us [regular] soldiers don't get any peace. All night we have to steal [diesel] oil drums and carry them out to here. Look at this – because you come to sell bicycles, I have scars across my shoulders [from carrying the drums]." After he spoke, he lowered his head and went back to Kyaw Paung Camp [on the Burma side of the border].

Burma Army IB (Infantry Battalion) 282, stationed on the border at Nat Aye Taung, took it upon themselves to buy bicycles for every officer to use, one each. They collected customs from traders and travelers for this purpose, but this money was not sufficient.

Another way they could collect funds was to have their men steal oil drums from the Total storage site at Yaharpyaungko. Each day, the soldiers had to steal drums of oil and carry them to Nat Aye Taung on the border with Thailand. They could sell two hundred liters of oil for 500 to 600 Thai baht. The officers of IB 282 collected the money.

The officers notified Burmese bicycle sellers in Thailand that they would buy bicycles for 10-15,000 kyat apiece. The sellers had to wait two or three days to get the money. In that time, the regular soldiers had to steal enough oil to get money to pay for the bicycles. The oil drums shouldn't have been running out so quickly, and the Total officials knew what was going on, but were hesitant to tell the military about this. However, on the Thai side of the border they took action to stop the Burmese from selling the bicycles. [It's not entirely clear how this was done – they suggest at the end of the article that more than forty people had to stop their trade, implying that some kind of force was used....]

"My soldiers didn't steal oil"

"Y'thuht phoe t'huh thoe bah," p. 8.

Total Co. is famous for its business dealings with Burma's regime, mainly the construction of a natural gas pipeline. They have had to deal with a variety of problems in dealing with the Burma Army and meeting the contract.

On the evening of August 2, French officials of Total Co. caught thieves by their diesel oil storage site at Yaharpyaungko. These thieves came to steal diesel oil drums, which had been disappearing nightly. The seven thieves had left the diesel store with 5-gallon plastic drums of diesel. After they were caught, it became clear that they were soldiers of Burma Army IB 282, so [the officials] sent them to the IB 282 officers, along with the drums and details of what had happened, so that action could be taken against the men.

However they didn't hear of any action having been taken, so they asked the IB 282 officers about it. They were told that this was an attempt to smear the soldiers, and that the soldiers had never ever stolen any oil from the depot at Yaharpyaungko.

Apparently, the French Total officials could not have been more dissatisfied at this ridiculous outcome.

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LANDLESS – OUT OF THE FRYING PAN, INTO THE FIRE

The stagnant economy, excessive government taxation, forced labor, forced relocation, and extortion are combining with the vicissitudes of weather to make farming unprofitable for many of Burma's farmers. As a result, a growing number of people in rural Burma are running out of money, running out of credit, then losing their land to debt. The growing problem of landlessness is a crisis for all of rural Burma, not just the landless poor, because environmental degradation increasingly threatens the productivity of Burma's remaining farms. In 1995, a team of development experts sponsored by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) visited several areas of rural Burma. Based on their observations, they suggested a possible scenario:

As trees are cut down because of fuelwood demand, commercial log exports, or to clear land for farming, there is an increase in soil erosion. The flood/drought cycle worsens, and streams dry up in the long dry season... small farmers... face declining yields, and end up in debt. They eventually lose their farms.[1]

Formal studies on the problem of landlessness and associated environmental issues in Burma are limited – most of the information on the issue is based primarily on observation. Nevertheless, reports from rural areas all over Burma reflect a broadly consistent reality: rural families are increasingly in debt, and those who have land are finding it harder and harder to make a living from it and to keep it. For poor people in rural Burma, one of their last options for income continues to be cutting the forest.

Losing land marks a grave change in a family's fortunes. With a few acres of fertile land and enough labor to farm it, many Burmese families have for generations, albeit at times with difficulty, been able to feed themselves. Landless due to debt, forcible relocation and land confiscation, however, they join the growing numbers of people totally at the mercy of Burma's stalled economy and the feeble and falling kyat. Knowing the risks and hardships of splitting up the household to search for work, impoverished rural families will try to stay in or near their villages for as long as they can, doing day labor or foraging in order to survive.

The forest represents the closest thing to social security that exists in many rural areas. With food prices high and rising steadily, many families already supplement a diet of rice and chilies with greens and other vegetables gathered from the forest. Also, when no other options for work exist, with a machete and a lot of hard work it's possible to make a few kyat towards the day's rice by cutting bamboo or wood for sale as firewood or charcoal. One man from the Delta described the situation while he was away for several months doing forced labor:

Splitting bamboo, Tenasserim Division [BI].

How could my family survive while I was absent? Well, they could get by on about 900 kyat a month at that time, so firstly my wife went and worked in the forest, collecting firewood and cutting bamboo which she resold to traders on the riverside, earning about 10 kyat per day, 300 kyat for the month. The other 600 she could get on interest-free credit from the merchants in the village, and [because they knew me] they knew that when I returned I could work hard to pay them back.... Most people used techniques along these lines in order to survive....[2]

A villager described the limited options at a forced relocation site in a civil-war zone in Shan State.

The Burmese arranged for nothing, we had to take care of ourselves in everything. They gave no food. Not only did they not give any food, but they also made the price of the rice very expensive.... We were not allowed to go out farming.... When we were there we had to cut firewood and sell it, and that way we could get 50 kyat a day. Only that.[3]

A Mon farmer from Tenasserim Division described how he lost everything as a result of a bad harvest and high government taxes:

I had a field of 3 acres. Sometimes we got 100 tins of paddy, sometimes 70 or 80. For the last harvest, I got 60. We had to sell 24 tins to the government for 90 kyat per tin when the market price is 370 kyat. I only grew rice.

For him, as well, the forest was a final source of income when he had out choices:

To get money to pay the fees to government, I worked for other people cutting bamboo and trees. They paid me about 100 kyat per day. We had some gold and we sold it all. Now, we have no more gold and we can't pay any longer. We also sold our pots, our jars and all our belongings. I had to borrow money from other villagers. So when I left, I sold my field to pay them back. Now, we have nothing left.[4]

The difference between the legions of poor who are cutting the jungle, and workers in the logging trade was described by a man who himself worked as a logger:

Some are loggers such as myself, but the majority are simply people who go to the forest and cut bamboo, then sell it on the riverbank where river traders take it to town. The activity could earn 60 to 80 kyat per day when I was staying there. What prevents people from improving their incomes is that they have no money to get some capital items [such as saws and other tools for cutting larger trees] to do more lucrative work. This is the big difference between people like myself, who are able to survive reasonably well, and those who are struggling to fill their stomachs every day.[5]

Though there may be significant economic differences between poor woodcutters and loggers ecologically the distinction is small. When forest is overcut, whether by machete or chainsaw, the result is deforestation and environmental degradation. There is another difference as well: the poorest will have to live with the legacy of the forest's destruction.

The loss of forest cover may have already begun to have palpable results throughout Burma. For two years in a row severe floods have destroyed an estimated 20-25% of

Burma's rice crop.[6] Tropical monsoons used to come with clockwork regularity; now there are reports from many parts of the country that the weather is growing unpredictable – that average temperatures are rising, rains are coming late or early or not at all. One person from Karenni State said, "Now because of the logging, the seasons are becoming abnormal. Sometimes there's rain in the summer, not at the normal time, so it damages the crops."[7] Environmental change is becoming another serious weight affecting the declining fortunes of Burmese farmers.

It is ironic that the people who will suffer most acutely from Burma's environmental degradation end up unavoidably contributing to it as well. The UNDP team who visited in 1995 wrote, "A plausible hypothesis is that the destruction of forest land has aggravated the landlessness problem."[8] It's likely that the reverse is equally likely – that poverty and landlessness contribute directly to the destruction of forest land. Throughout much of the developing world, landlessness has similarly led to a vicious cycle of rural poverty, environmental degradation, and decreasing farm productivity; and wherever it has begun, the problem has proven far easier to identify than to resolve.

This crisis of rural poverty and landlessness, and the struggle of Burma's poorest people for food, goes largely unreported by organizations who specialize in collecting information about Burma. When such stories are recorded, it is often as a kind of postscript to many instances of abuse, taxation, and extortion that take place throughout the country. However, even if peace were restored to Burma today, there would still be millions of people without land and without sufficient income. For these people, until they have other choices, the forest will remain one of the last comforts in an increasingly barren landscape.

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E. Zeamer

Endnotes

1 Dr. David Dapice, "Landlessness, Poverty and the environment in Myanmar: Can Grassroots Initiatives Create Sustainable Progress?" Harvard Institute for International Development, for the UNDP, 10 Feb 1995.
2 Report on Irrawaddy Division, Burma Issues internal report, FT #14, 24-30 Aug 1997.
3 "Sai Pan [illegible], M, 22, Pa'O Buddhist farmer, Sanen village, Sanen tract, Loi Lem township, interviewed 25 Feb 1998, Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) report #98-03.
4 "Nai Kyaw," M, 50, Mon Buddhist farmer, Kywe Thone Nyi Ma village, Ye Pyu Township, interviewed 15 Mar 1996, KHRG #96-21.
5 Ibid., Irrawaddy report, Aug 1997.
6 D. Brunnstrom, "Economic decline not a cause of downfall – yet," Bangkok Post, 22 Aug 1998.
7 Report on Loikaw, Burma Issues internal report, Sep 1998.
8 Ibid., Dr. David Dapice, 10 Feb 1995.

NEWS BRIEFS

International Divestments

International organizations and transnational corporations are abandoning their investments in Burma, whether for economic or for political reasons:

Ericsson, a world-leading supplier of telecommunications and the transnational corporation which introduced cellular phones to Burma, suspended all business ties with Burma on September 1. Due to concerns expressed in the United States, where at Ericsson-sponsored concerts protestors were informing the public about the company's involvement, they abandoned their former reasoning which stated, "...telecommunications is something that in the long run always strengthens democratic development."

Atlantic Richfield Co. (ARCO) also pulled out of Burma, stating that the decision to withdraw was for economic reasons, and not a response to pressure from human rights groups. They claim not to have renewed contracts because the gas fields in their blocks did not appear to have the potential to compete with the Yadana and Yetagun fields for control of the market.

The World Bank has placed all credit to Burma in non-accrual status, barring all further credit to the country, a condition which according to bank regulations automatically occurs when any loan of credit is overdue by six months. Though Burma has not received any new loans from the World Bank since the 1988 government suppression of pro-democracy demonstrators, the Bank's announcement will not serve to further Burma's international financial standing. As of September 2, 1998, Burma owed the equivalent of US$14.02 million.

BBC World Service, 12 Aug 1998. *Business Wire*, 1 Sep 1998. *Bangkok Post*, 16 Sep 1998.

Parliament in Burma

Since September 6 the junta claims it has invited over 700 NLD (National League for Democracy) members and elected parliamentarians to government "guest houses" to participate in discussions regarding the NLD's call to convene a People's Parliament. Convinced to join such discussions after being woken in the middle of the night and bound by SPDC forces, the NLD and junta clearly disagree on the term "invite." The detention of NLD members ensures that the People's Parliament could not assemble as promised by Aung San Suu Kyi. The tally of detained NLD members now sits at 912.

Since the SPDC had failed to "invite" Aung San Suu Kyi and other central committee members to its government-sponsored dialogue, the NLD formed a 10-member committee on September 16, gaining support and representative power to act on behalf of the 251 elected MPs. Their first decision as an active body of power was to declare all laws passed since 1988 illegal unless ratified by the Parliament. The representative committee chose Dr. Saw Mra Aung, head of the Arakan League for Democracy, as its spokesman, confirming its desire to incorporate ethnic dialogue. The Lahu, Wa, Palaung, Shan and Karen, despite SPDC's accusations to the contrary, have offered support to the NLD's actions.

The Nation, 17 Sep 1998. ABSDF Statement, 7 Sep 1998.

Rice for the Army

Since July, when the military announced that army battalions would be required to grow their own food, there have been several reports of the army confiscating arable land and food supplies from the people. The ABSDF reported that Burma Army regiments were given 6 million kyat each in June to provide their own food, but senior officials had diverted these funds into business ventures. Army divisions in Thaton, Mon State have already confiscated 10,000 acres of arable land from 20 villages without any compensation. Since the beginning of August, 450 acres have also been seized in Karen State and the landowners are currently being forced to stay and grow rice for the Army.

KNU press releases 22 & 23, 18 & 22 Aug 1998. ABSDF press releases, 5 & 20 Aug 1998.

Demonstrations and protests

On August 24 in Rangoon, two protests were held in support of the NLD. A group of approximately 150 students blocked off an intersection at Rangoon University in a show of support for the NLD's campaign to convene parliament. Later the same day a group of students gathered to protest near Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT).

On September 3, almost 4,000 students joined two separate protests on two different RIT campuses. The protests were provoked by anger at examination arrangements and government plans to move most of the students from the downtown Rangoon location to several small campuses outside the city in efforts to control student political activity.

Bangkok Post, 25 Aug, 5 Sep 1998. *Democratic Voice of Burma* broadcast, 26 Aug 1998

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The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"Although she is a daughter of *Bogyoke* Aung San, she has a wrong spiritual attitude as she has been mixed with alien blood." – *New Light of Myanmar editorial discussing the mixed parentage of Aung San Suu Kyi, whose mother was Daw Khin Kyi, a Karen, and served as Burma's ambassador to India.*

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"I want to stop using the pipe but our fields are full of poppies, not rice, and the smoke makes my hunger go away." – *7-year-old Aung Than, explaining his addiction due to military orders for his village of Pang Sak to grow opium and not rice.*

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"Though they say they are working for human rights and women's affairs, they are in fact misleading young girls with anti-government spirit and disobedient character and persuading them to think highly of the West, thereby weakening their determination to safeguard the race." – *SPDC Sec-1 Khin Nyunt speaking about the NLD.*

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"This report reveals a saga of untold misery and suffering, oppression and exploitation of large sections of the population inhabiting Myanmar [Burma] by the Government, military and other public officers. It is a story of gross denial of human rights to which the people of Myanmar have been subjected particularly since 1988 and from which they find no escape except fleeing from the country. The Government, the military and the administration seem oblivious to the human rights of the people and are trampling upon them with impunity." – *The Commission of Inquiry into Forced Labour in Myanmar (Burma) – the International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2 July 1998.*

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"Tourism is not concerned with politics. If the situation is stable people can come and see the beautiful landscape. There are no demonstrations in the streets. Trouble makers are only a few percent and confined to campuses." – *Nyunt Nyunt Than, the SPDC's director of tourism promotion, in response to questions about the impact of the junta's heavy handed suppression of all political opposition.*

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"Burma military tried to keep good relations with Thailand, and Thailand was the first to support Burma. But the Burmese military has no consistent policy based on moral standards. Its policies are ad hoc and so they abandoned Thailand and turned to Singapore and Malaysia when they thought they could get more there." - *Dr. Thuang Htun, Presidium Member, National Council of the Union of Burma.*

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