Report: Why Burmese Women Become Sex Workers

Introduction

"Think about it, nobody enjoys working as a prostitute. We have no money to survive... we have to work as prostitutes." - Ma Thit Thit

This report examines some of the reasons why women from Mon State, Burma, become commercial sex workers. WCRP interviewed 11 prostitutes from 10 brothels and restaurants who currently work in Ye Township and Thanbyuzayat Town. The majority of the interviewed women became prostitutes out of economic desperation and a lack of other job opportunities.

Children in Burma are often expected to provide for their parents. Many of the women interviewed said that their parents were unable...
to support their families, due to a scarcity of jobs, a poor economy, and spending money on alcohol and illegal lottery tickets.

Background

Burma is one of the world’s poorest countries and is ruled by a brutal military junta called the State Police and Development Council (SPDC). The SPDC’s political mismanagement and isolationist policies have led to soaring inflation and economic stagnation with in the country. The SPDC’s policies make it difficult to gather accurate statistics, although estimates indicate that Burma’s GDP grows at an average annual rate of 2.9% (the lowest rate of economic growth in the Greater Mekong Sub-region) and that the country’s 52 million people receive an average annual income of $220 per capita.

The international community, including the U.S., the EU, Australia, and Canada, has imposed trade sanctions on Burma since 1996, leading not only to financial troubles for the military regime but also the closure of many factories. In particular, the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003 cut off all imports from Burma to the U.S. for 2 years. Burma’s regime estimated that more than 80,000 garment factory workers lost their jobs in response to this act. The government-sponsored Business Information Journal in Rangoon claimed that state-owned factories would employ laid-off workers, however in reality, many women turned to sex work. The US

Footnotes


New report details process of pervasive sexual trafficking and abuse of women along Thai-Burma border

Woman and Child Rights Project

August 31, 2009

The ongoing abuse of women through sexual trafficking is a “pervasive and arguably growing problem”, which is systemically bound to the economic mismanagement of the Burmese government, says the Woman and Child Rights Project (WCRP) in a report released this morning. In the 90 page report titled Nowhere Else To Go, the WCRP explores the systemic causes of sexual trafficking and the abusive journey the victims undergo.

Nowhere Else to Go, examines the tragic causes of sexual trafficking through a two-prong approach. Illuminating the root causes and push factors that have worked to drive women into positions of being sexually trafficked, the report cites “systemic and structural discrimination” and the, “harsh economic reality” of living under Burmese military rule, among the background causes.

Then, with analysis from interviews conducted with over 40 victims of trafficking between 2004 and 2009, the WCRP illustrates the journey of abuse women experience using three categories defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – “Act”, “Means” and “Purpose”. These categories detail the journey of victims, some as young as 10 years old, from their entrapment, abuse they experience through trafficking, to the final purpose for which they are trafficked.

Nowhere Else to Go comes at a crucial stage in women’s rights development. Within the next year the 2010 election will alter the political landscape of Burma, making these issues of pervasive abuse and ongoing sexual trafficking a major obstacle for a country hoping to appear as a legitimate democracy. “We have insufficient protection for women and children in Burma under the rule of law, so they suffer especially,” explains Nai Kasauh Mon, the director of Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM). Citing efforts by the current Junta to address the problem, he is troubled that still “no clear progress is made.”

Further Details:

Full PDF copies of Nowhere Else to Go can be downloaded at: http://www.rehmonnya.org

Hard copies of Nowhere Else to Go, as well as print-quality photos for news publication can be obtained by emailing wcrpcontact@yahoo.com.

Questions or requests for interviews in English, Mon and Burmese should be made by emailing wcrpcontact@yahoo.com; or calling Mi Jarai Non at +66 (0)833176 795.

About WCRP:

The Woman and Child Rights Project (WCRP) of Southern Burma, was founded in 2000 in order to monitor and protect the rights of women and children and focus international attention on Burma in order to pressure Burma’s military regime that has widely involved in violations of women’s rights. Its goals, additionally, are to educate and empower women and children to know about and engage in protecting these rights.
government issued reports stating that in some cases, former garment workers, "entered the flourishing illegal sex and entertainment industries" after losing their factory jobs.\(^6\)

In 2008 cyclone Nargis devastated Burma leaving, according to ASEAN estimates, almost 140,000 people dead or missing, and it had a "severe and adverse impact" on 2.4 million people. The cyclone hit the Burmese economy hard, causing an estimated 120 billion kyat in damages and 65 billion kyat in losses.\(^7\) Burma's already weak economy sank even further in 2009 with the global economic crisis, leading to more job cuts and rising unemployment. Nonetheless, the number of Burmese prostitutes working in Burma and its neighboring countries is steadily increasing, particularly among the urban poor.\(^8\)

According to The Democratic Voice of Burma, the economic crisis of 2009 contributed to a rise in prostitution in Rangoon.\(^9\) An article published by The Irrawaddy in July of 2009 attests that the number of prostitutes working along the highway in Burma is growing and most sex workers are "girls from poor villages who can't find any other job". The number of roadside sex workers has increased considerably over the last few years and even university students are selling their bodies along the highway in rising numbers.\(^10\) The Burmese Government's extensive security controls, limitations on the flow of information, and lack of transparency make it difficult to access the number of prostitutes and trafficked persons in Burma,\(^11\) but it is estimated that there are as many as 40,000 Burmese prostitutes employed in Thai brothels. The majority of them are ethnic minorities.\(^12\)

Several studies indicate that the number of Burmese prostitutes in Burma and Thailand is increasing, especially among poor and uneducated women and girls.\(^13\)

Women in Burma face discrimination on many levels and there are no non-governmental independent women's rights organizations to address the disparity.\(^14\) Poverty disproportionately affects women, who consistently receive less pay than men for equal positions. Many women do not have the skills or education to find work outside of the house and in some communities after marriage the women generally rely on their husband for income. If they divorce their husbands, they often have no source of revenue.\(^15\)

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\(^15\) Interview of multiple women by WCRP reporter. September 2009.
Economic Desperation

In Burmese culture, children usually live with their parents until they are married; some married couples also live with one of the spouse’s parents. Grown children are expected to provide for their parents and younger siblings. In some cases, if parents or older siblings cannot provide an adequate income, younger children may also work to support their families.

Many of the interviewed women became prostitutes to financially sustain their families, although few have told their families how they earn money. Ma Thi Thi Win explained, "My family doesn't know what I’m doing here. I lied to them and told them I worked a normal job. Now, I am ashamed to return home, and I have nowhere else to go." Ma Thit Thit and Ma Moe Moe Win have also not told her parents that they are prostitutes.

Wages

The women interviewed for this report are paid a range of prices for their services. Most reported that half or more of the money the customers pay goes to the brothel owner. Ma Su Su and Ma Ei Ei, who work in the same brothel in Thanbyuzayat Town, each earn 1,500 kyat per customer, and the brothel owner keeps 2,000 kyat. If they spend the night with a customer, they

Continued report on page 8
Thai Government Forcibly Makes Migrant Workers Temporarily Legal While Burmese Officials Collect Additional Fees

September 29, 2009

WCRP: On July 15, the Thai and Burmese governments agreed to implement a new temporary passport system. The temporary passports were designed to legalize Burmese migrant workers, however SPDC troops in Mon State have been demanding additional funds and threatening imprisonment to those who cannot afford to pay.

In August, a 25-year-old woman from Kaw Ka Bain village, Southern Burma, working in Mahachai, Thailand, travelled to Myawaddy, Burma, with 4 friends to apply for temporary passports.

In order to receive a temporary passport, an applicant must go through a verification process which requires personal information and their family’s address.

The woman and her friends each paid the required 3,000 kyat fee for their temporary passports. While in the passport office, the SPDC requested an extra 2 million kyat from each person, threatening imprisonment in Insein if not paid immediately.

Neither the woman nor her friends could pay the additional amount. The group was then held in the passport office for one week while the SPDC went to their parents’ houses and tried to extort the money.

A villager from Kaw Ka Bain explained the extortion attempt in their village, “The SPDC said ‘If you don’t give us 2 million kyat your daughter will have to go to jail for 5 years.’ The woman’s parents are poor and they could not give the money …the woman is now in prison with her 4 friends.”

The woman started her 5 year jail sentence in August. Her release is contingent on her parents paying 2 million kyat. “The headman of the village tried to talk to the SPDC and ask for her release but his request was ignored”, added the villager from Kaw Ka Bain.

The woman’s parents sell chickens in Kaw Ka Bain but only earn enough to provide for their daily intake. They tried to borrow the 2 million kyat but no one would help them. The parents of the woman’s friends could not afford to pay for their children either.

The SPDC has also been collecting money from villagers in surrounding areas.

In one instance, a 25-year-old male villager from Anan Village, Thanbyuzayat Township, made a temporary passport in Myawaddy and only paid the required 3,000 kyat fee.
WCRP: 10th standard students were required to pay 20,000 kyat to the headmistress in Kawdut village, Ye Township, Mon State, said a local source.

The families of the students who passed their exams were expected to each shoulder the fees; 31 of 60 students passed in March.

According to a teacher, the Kawdut headmistress said, "This year we have to repair the school, so the students who passed the exam have to pay 20,000 kyat each."

Students' parents became upset upon hearing about this request. One parent said, "The school is new and they built a stone school. We don't see where the school needs repairs and why they said they have to pay for school repairs we don't understand. In other villages, if the students pass the exam they are given a prize. We never see the other villages [pay as we do]."

The normal registration fee for a Kawdut village 10th standard students is 4,200 kyat; this cost does not include textbooks and other materials.

According to a teacher from a Mon school in Kawdut village, "When my brother attended 10th standard, we had to spend a lot of money for school costs. I thought after 10th standard I didn't have to pay any [further] costs, but now I have to pay 20,000 kyat again. I cannot pay...I have no money. This year is not the same as last year, because we have economic problems."

As a result of continued economic strains, many villagers from Kawdut, a mainly agrarian community, have migrated to Thailand.

The excessive and oftentimes arbitrary school fees in Mon State have been widely reported by the Independent Mon News Agency (IMNA). In a recent article IMNA reported that although the government education ministry claimed to provide free textbooks in Mon State, student still had to pay 3,000 kyat each.
Ma Chaw Su, who works at a brothel in a small fishing village, earns 1,500 kyat per customer and another 1,500 goes to the brothel owner. Mi Moe Moe Win, who works in a Bayinma restaurant/brothel in Ye Town, earns about 2,000 kyat per night, while the brothel owner takes in the remaining two-thirds of the money.

Ma Thi Thi Win, who works in a restaurant in Ye Township, earns 500 out of the 6,000 kyat the restaurant charges per hour to be with a customer, if sex is not involved. If sex is involved, she is paid 3,500 kyat while the restaurant charges 10,000 kyat for her services.

Ma Hsaung Hnin Wei, who works at Achitnat Restaurant in Ye Town, earns 2,000 kyat per customer, while the customer pays 6,000 kyat. She estimates that she saves around 10,000 kyat per night.

In addition to paying the brothel owners part of their earnings, many women reported paying a broker to arrange for their transportation and food en route to their jobs. Ma Thi Thi Win had to pay 60,000 kyat to her broker while Ma Htoo Htoo Wei had to pay 80,000 kyat each for transportation. Ma Hsaung Hnin Wei had to pay her broker 80,000 kyat after she started working.

Circumstances

A large number of sex workers in Burma were not tricked or forced into the trade but became prostitutes out of economic desperation. For example, Ma Thi Thi, an 18-year-old woman from Thirimyine quarter, Moulmein Town, Mon State, who was interviewed by a WCRP field reporter in August of 2009, explained, “Even though it is not a good job, I decided to work as a prostitute so that I could earn a higher income to send back to my family . . . We are poor and need the money. Now I can keep some money.”

Ma Chaw Su, a 17-year-old female Burman from Kyaik Khame Town, Thanbyuzayat Township, left her job growing rice to work as a prostitute with her cousin. Originally Ma Chaw Su worked in Thanbyuzayat Town but in June of 2009 she started working at a brothel in Yetaung village, Ye Township. At the brothel she works with 8 women, ages 17 to 30, most of whom came from Mon State. Several of her customers are fishermen visiting from other villages.

An 18-year-old female Mon prostitute, Mi Moe Moe Win, from Kamarmoe village, Chaung Zaung Township, explained “I used to work at Kyaw Bear restaurant in Moulmein and one night I lost my virginity for 100,000 kyat (about $100, US) to a wealthy Chinese man. Then I came to work here in Ye Town. Nobody enjoys working as a prostitute but otherwise, I would have no money to survive.” Since July 2009, Mi Moe Moe Win has worked in Ye Town at a brothel known as Bayinma restaurant, which is popular among Mon communities. She works with 19 other girls, ages 17 to 30, of Burman, Karen and Arakanese ethnicity. Since starting her work as a prostitute, she has been able to send 1 million kyat to her family.

According to Ma Thi Thi, “I decided to work as a sex worker, even though I know this is not a good job, because I can earn a lot of money in a short period and I can send it back to my family. My parents do not know what I am doing but we are poor and always face a shortage of money. Therefore, I must do it even though I don’t want to.”

Family

The Burmese government has spent a very small amount of its budget on education, an estimated 1.2% in 2005. Consequently, school is prohibitively expensive for many families in Burma. To help their families and because of fees and economic hardship, students often drop out of school. In this situation girls easily fall into prostitution.16

Ma Thi Thi Win, a 20-year-old Burman woman from Pegu Town, Pegu Division, dropped out of school when she was in 9th standard because her family could not pay her school fees. After leaving school, she and 4 friends left their village together in search of jobs. Since June 2009, she has worked in Irrawaddy 2 restaurant, which is located in Ye Town, Ye Township, Mon State. “I am not happy to work here [as a prostitute] and I want to leave my work, but I need more money to send back to my family. I am glad to help my family but sometimes I get upset when I have bad guests who threaten me. I have no choice because to me,

it is most important to help my family,” she tearfully explained.

Illegal lotteries in Burma are very popular, and may lead to increased situations of poverty for many families. Ma Su Su, a 21-year-old Burman woman from Halinthaya Township, Rangoon Division, currently works in Thanbyuzayat Town. She explained, “My parents gamble in the illegal lottery and we had to pawn our house to get money. Therefore, I chose this job to earn more money to send back to my family.”

Another woman from Pegu town, 18-year-old Ma Ei Ei, who works with Ma Su Su, stated, “My father gambles in the illegal lottery, drinks alcohol and plays cards. If I did not select this job [prostitution], we would have no money to survive.”

Ma The Su, a 22-year-old Burman woman from Moulmein City, Mon State, said she also became a prostitute after her family squandered the money she had earned. She has worked in Ziphyutaung Village, Ye Township since July of 2009.

**Nargis**

Cyclone Nargis which struck Burma in May of 2008, killed thousands of people, devastated millions and destroyed parts of the country. Ripple effects of the cyclone exacerbated poverty throughout Burma thus contributing to the increase in prostitution.

17-year-old Ma Htoo Htoo Wei from Labutta Township has been working as a prostitute since August 2009 at Shwepuntaung Brothel in Ye Township. After her family lost its source of income due to the cyclone, she found a broker and became a prostitute. She now works at the brothel with 14 other women, ages 15 to 30.

**Domestic Abuse and Divorce**

Domestic abuse and in some cases divorce, have also forced women into prostitution. Ma Kyu Kyu Win, a 22-year-old woman from Botataung Township, Rangoon Division, has worked as a prostitute at Kabyar Restaurant in Ye Township since August 2009. She explained, “I left my husband and came to work in Ye town. I had no options other than to work as a prostitute.”

**KTV**

Brothels employ a large number of prostitutes in Burma while others work at karaoke bars, known as Karaoke Television or KTV. These bars are a growing phenomenon throughout Burma and offer one-hour sessions with women in private rooms. Since KTV bars are not brothels by name and do not advertise sex, they are able to operate legally. Although customers at a KTV bar are not always looking for sex, in many cases, “sex as well as songs are on the menu”.

Usually, club managers keep a portion of the money nonetheless, women may earn more than they could otherwise make. A source that recently visited a KTV bar in Moulmein said the bar charged 7,000 kyat per hour for an air-conditioned room and 3,500 kyat per hour for a non air-conditioned room.

Ma Thi Thi Win, a 20-year-old woman from Shwemawdaw Pagoda Street, Pegu Town, Pegu Division migrated to Ye Township in June of 2009. She now works as a prostitute with 9 other women ages 15 to 30 at Irrawaddy 2 restaurant. For her job, she stays in a private room with each customer for one hour. In total, she was able to send 150,000 kyat to her family in July. She said, “The restaurant’s owner is not bad and I am free to go outside. But I am still not happy to work here and I want to leave my work. Yet,

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19-Year-Old Woman Raped and Murdered in Karen State

Wed 16 Sep 2009, IMNA

A 19-year old woman of mixed Mon and Karen heritage, named Mi Mu, was raped and murdered by a gang of Karen men last week in Kyainnseikyi Township in Karen state.

On September 11th, at about 10 pm, Mi Mu was abducted from where she worked on a rubber plantation near Doe Htun village, by a group of 20 men. The group had an accomplice inform Mi Mu’s brother that a ransom of 7 million kyat was needed to ensure her safe return.

Unfortunately, Mi Mu’s body was discovered at 7 pm on September 12th, before her family could collect the appropriate sum of money for her release. A search party located her body near the Pyuk Ja village rubber plantation where she had been employed. Villagers confirmed that Mi Mu had been raped before her murder.

“When we saw Mi Mu’s body, she was naked, and it looked like she was raped ”said an eyewitness Pyouk Ja villager.

Since the discovery of Mi Mu’s body, the New Mon State Party ( NMSP ) has arrested 5 suspects, and a search is underway for the remaining 15. Kanyinnseikkyi Township is under the Moulmein division of NMSP control.

Mi Mu’s rape and murder is the second such case to be connected to the Pyuk Ja village rubber plantation. A 21-year-old Mon woman was also abducted, raped and murdered by a group of Karen men in the same area earlier this year.

I have to concentrate...so I can get more money to send back to my family.”

Brokers & Trafficking

In many cases, brokers promising high-paying jobs lure women to distant foreign cities. The brokers regularly charge the women for transportation, food and other costs of living, in exchange for helping the women find work. In some cases, brokers trick women into becoming prostitutes, promising high-paying jobs without informing women of the actual work. According to a 2009 report by the U.S. Department of State, it is believed that trafficking of women and girls to other countries and within Burma for sexual exploitation was substantial in 2008 and that at least several thousand women and girls were victims of trafficking. Most traffickers were small-scale operators working in coordination with brokers.¹⁹

Ma Hsauung Hnin Wei, a 14-year-old girl from Shwe Myanmar village, Kyaukpyu Township, Arakan State, migrated to Ye Town with her friends in search of a job. She now works as a prostitute at Achipnut Restaurant while her friends work at various neighboring establishments. She explained, “All of us were trafficked by Ma Nga, a broker who lives in Rangoon. She promised us that we would get a good job and that she would pay for transportation in advance.”

Ma Tin Thin, a 15-year-old woman, from Kyinmyindaing Township, Rangoon Division, who migrated to Ye Town, where she works as a prostitute, said, ”I came with a female broker who promised to provide a job at a store in Ye Town. She said we would earn 150,000 kyat per month and we believed and followed her. When we arrived, we had to work as prostitutes.” Another woman, Ma Htoo Htoo Wei, said the restaurant owner took her ID card and does not allow her to leave the property.

In some cases, customers abuse women. Ma Htoo Htoo Wei stated, “I don’t want to do this job because customers bully me. If they are dissatisfied, they abuse us and break chairs. I am really scared to deal with them. Sometimes I want to fight back but it

Invitation for Feedback to Our Publication  
“The Plight”  
of Women and Children in Southern Burma

Dear Readers,

In 2000, with objectives to monitor the situation of women and children in Southern Burma and to empower them with the rights described in CEDAW and CRC, which are both ratified by the current military regime, our “Woman and Child Rights Project (Southern Burma)” came into existence.

Under this project, “The Plight” Newsletter is produced quarterly and focuses on the general situation of women and children in Burma and how their human rights are violated by the ruling regime and its army.

In a plan to evaluate our publication, we wish to get FEEDBACK from our readers. Hence, can you kindly send us your feedback. If you know anyone who would like to receive the newsletter or if you wish to send your feedback, please feel free to contact the following mailing and e-mail address.

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Bangkok, Thailand 10501  
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Website: www.rehmonnya.org

With regards,  
Project Coordinator  
Woman and Child Rights Project - Southern Burma

is not possible to do that because if I don’t talk with the customer politely the owner, who is Burman, will cut half of my monthly salary.” Ma Thi Thi Win added, “Sometimes the costumers intimidate me and I feel very depressed.”

Minors

In addition to laws against prostitution, Burma has laws protecting minors and specifically prohibiting child prostitution. However, these laws are not enforced and many women under the age of 18 work as prostitutes. According to the report by the U.S. Department of State, foreign diplomatic representatives in Rangoon and Mandalay “noted widespread presence of female prostitutes who appeared to be in their teens. Additionally, some brothels reportedly offered young teenage ‘virgins’ to their customers for a substantial additional fee.”

Although there are no reliable statistics as to its extent, studies indicate that trafficking of minors within Burma and across Burma’s borders continues to increase. 21

2 of the 12 women interviewed for this report were minors when they began working as a prostitute and several of the interviewed women reported working with minors.

Ma Hsaung Hnin Wei, a 14-year-old girl from Shwemyanmar village, Kyaukpyu Township, Arakan State, explained, “I am too young to have sex with many people and sometimes I feel a lot of pain. But this job provides my with a good income.”

An 18-year-old Mon female, Mi Moe Moe Win, from Kamarmoe village, Chaung Zau Township, stated, “I used to work at Kyaw Bear Restaurant in Moulmein and one night I lost my virginity for 100,000 kyat ($100 US) to a wealthy Chinese man. Then I came to work here in Ye Town. Nobody enjoys working as a prostitute but otherwise I would have no money to survive.”

Government Involvement

Under the Suppression of Prostitution Act of 1949, amended in 1998, prostitution is illegal in Burma and carries a punishment of 3 years in prison. Owning a brothel, defined as “any . . . place habitually used for the purpose of prostitution or used with reference to any kind of business for the purpose of prostitution,” is also illegal, as is forcing or enticing women into prostitution.

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
The Act states that these crimes “shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not less than one year and not more than 5 years and may also be liable to a fine."23 Yet despite Burma's laws, the sex trade is increasing rapidly and the government's law enforcement efforts have been minimal.24

Not only do government officers fail to implement the law, they are often complicit in the prostitution industry and have been known to accept bribes and turn a blind eye, or use prostitutes' services themselves. The U.S. Department of State found that, pertaining to the prostitution industry; corruption among Burmese authorities was widespread.25 KTV restaurants are able to offer prostitution without ramifications through unofficial agreements with the local authorities; sometimes restaurant owners are themselves military authorities.

Ma Moe Moe Win, who works at Bayinma Restaurant, said that the owner of the restaurant where she works is a retired Burmese soldier who has a good relationship with the policemen in Ye Town. Several brothel owners pay bribes to police officers. Ma Hsaun Hnin Wei, who works as a prostitute at Achitnut Restaurant, said her restaurant's owner pays 250,000 Kyat to the Ye Town police each month. Ma Chaw Su explained that her restaurant’s owner pays the Ye Town Police 20,000 Kyat per prostitute.

A 2009 investigation by Ko Htwe of The Irrawaddy found that many prostitutes have sex with police at a discount or for free. They are afraid that if they refuse, the police will arrest them.26 Ma Su Su and Ma Ei Ei said if the SPDC authorities come, they have to give free sex to them without charge. According to the U.S. State Department’s report, some prostitutes were raped or robbed by police after being taken into custody and those imprisoned were often abused. Women who reported being raped by police or soldiers were sometimes themselves arrested.27

**Conclusion**

The 11 women interviewed for this report became prostitutes out of economic desperation. Their stories and lives are examples of violations of the CEDAW and CRC which the SPDC willingly signed and claims to uphold. The Burmese government has pledged to impede prostitution and trafficking, although in reality the prostitution industry grows as Burma's economy deteriorates.

Government officials compound the problem by accepting bribes in exchange for ignoring prostitution establishments and in many cases partaking in prostitutes' services. Poverty and corruption are the root causes of the sex trade in Burma and until significant change occurs on these fronts, the country's prostitution industry will continue to flourish.

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