

Burma Issues Newsletter

Volume 1 Number 10

November 1991

Military Operations in the Delta

Slorc Demands More Taxes

What Lies Ahead?

On The Brink of Hell

The Nobel Peace Prize

Military Operations in the Delta

After just one month into the dry season, heavy fighting between the Burmese junta's troops and one of the ethnic armed dissident groups, the Karen National Union, is taking place in the delta south and west of Rangoon. The fighting started on the 11th of October when about 60 Karen guerrillas ambushed a junta patrol unit and killed 22 troops at Tha Lon village in Bogalay township only about 50 miles from Rangoon, the capital of Burma. On the 12th of October, another two clashes broke out at Thame and Tawpine in the same township. According to the junta's radio report on October 11, the heavy fighting started when the security force's normal search operations found one Ak 47 assault rifle belonging to ethnic Karen guerrillas who had penetrated into the area from the Karen National Union of the Karen State in southeastern Burma. Subsequently, other military units who came into the region on patrol were ambushed by about 60 Karen guerrillas. Later the fighting spread

out widely into the entire area. This has been was one of the most severe shocks for the military regime since they began their three decades of militarization. The delta is well known as the country's rice bowl and is also a strategic entrance door to the sea. Ethnic Karens have traditionally dominated the area. In response, the junta immediately sent in numerous troops of infantry units, navy ships and even fighter bombers to suppress, not only the guerrillas, but also the villages suspected of collaborating with the KNU. Almost all of the villages are situated along the banks of the rivers and streams so are very easy to be annihilated by navy ships. Eventually, the junta poured about 2,000 security forces into the area and were searching house to house for any suspects. One report indicated that about one thousand villagers had already been arrested. Hundreds of other villagers are fleeing to the mountainous Arakan range west of the delta where there is safety in the thick forests and rough terrain for their hiding. The junta's security forces are cutting off the delta from the other districts and tightening security in the region. The military shut down all the schools and offices for security reasons. According to the junta, security units arrested five guerrillas on October 12. Local villagers claim that the five guerrillas are only civilians who were suspected by the junta. One resident from the delta said that an unknown number of civilians were killed by the shelling from navy ships and by bombs from the junta's fighter bombers. The delta region is under the control of Maj Gen Myint Aung, commander of the Southwest military command of the Burmese military. According to civilians, Myint Aung is a cousin of Aung San Suu Kyi who is a strong opposition leader under house arrest for more than two years and who recently won the Nobel Peace prize. During the 1988 unarmed uprising, Maj Gen Myint Aung murdered thousands of peaceful demonstrators in the delta. He is very notorious as one of the Burmese butchers of the military regime region.

Stop arms shipments to Burma

Last year China sold F-6 and F-7 bomber fighters, patrol boats and light arms worth about US\$1.4 billion. It is these weapons which are now killing the civilians in the delta. Hundreds of villages have been burnt down and the people made homeless. A German privately owned company, Fritz Werner, has also been directly involved in the killing since 1962. At that time it was owned by the West German government and supported production of G-3 and G-4 assault rifles. During the student demonstrations in 1962, hundreds of students were shot down by these Fritz Werner-produced assault rifles. In 1984, Fritz Werner started a joint venture with the junta's Heavy Industry Corporation for the manufacture of ammunition in Burma. According to staff of the Defence Weapons Industry of Burma, German experts are still providing technical assistance in order to produce the weapons and some of the raw materials are imported from Germany. In the 1988 nation-wide uprising, Fritz Werner-made rifles were the most used to shoot down about 8,000 innocent students and demonstrators. Moreover, the company has been indirectly involved in the killing of the ethnic people for more than 30 years.

Singapore's Allied Ordnance is one of the major arms suppliers for the Burmese military government. Allied Ordnance is a joint venture of Sweden's Nobel Industry and Singapore's Shengli Holding. Pakistani arms, mortars, rocket launchers and rifles worth about US\$20 million arrived in Burma the middle of this year. Some of these weapons were made in China and Eastern Europe. Yugoslavia's G-4 Super craft and training aircraft arrived in Burma in late 1991. All of these weapons provided by the foreign countries have helped create about 82,000 refugees and 12,000 political prisoners in Burma. None of these weapons are useful for any kind of purpose other than protecting the power of the military government over the people. Moreover the military's "dry season offensives" will bring about a tremendous increase in the number of refugees and cause the deaths of many thousands of ethnic people in Burma. The military still demands that all the ethnic and political dissidents surrender unconditionally before any talks can be held. This is impossible since the security of the ethnic people as well as the political dissidents can not be ensured. For the sake of a peaceful solution to the misery in Burma, all the arms shipments to Burma must immediately be ended.

[Return to Top](#)

Slorc Demands More Taxes

On October 26, the military regime ordered homeowners in Rangoon to pay more taxes to the military. The amount of tax demanded has not yet been clarified. According to Slorc, the amount of tax will be based on the size and design of the house, and all homeowners must inform Slorc immediately about this information. Moreover, the regime threatened that if any person failed to provide the information, drastic action would be taken against them. According to the military, the reason for the tax is to raise money needed to upgrade the city of Rangoon to be of international standard. In fact, the military probably needs more money to cover its increased military expenses resulting from the civil war. Currently taxes estimated at US\$38.17 million are collected yearly from the people. This money goes into the military's pockets. Reports suggest that Slorc uses an estimated US\$3.69 million daily on the civil war. The rest of the money needed to carry on the civil war comes from foreign investments and probably from the sale of opium.

Income from foreign investments are difficult to estimate since many of them are through private sources. However the Burma Alert, Volume 2, No 7 suggests that Slorc has received about US\$655.2995 million in foreign investments since 1989. This includes US\$317.0950 million from concessions for oil exploration. The largest share of this amount is from Shell, Netherlands which has invested US\$80.0000 million and the second is from Amoco, USA with an investment of US\$51.0000 million. Other major sources of foreign currency for Slorc come from fishing, timber, trade and the sale of embassy property (particularly in Tokyo Japan). This amounts to about US\$595.0000 million since 1989. Thai firms have contributed at least US\$180.0000 million through logging contracts and perhaps as much as US\$29.0000 million through fishing contracts. If the money earned through these foreign investments, as well as the money raised through taxes, were used for development of the country, the lives of the people could be drastically improved. In 1987 Burma was declared a Least Developed Country (LDC) by the United Nations making it possible for some of Burma's debts to be written off. France recently canceled US\$82 million in debts owed by Burma while Japan has, to date, also canceled US\$65.6 million (Burma Alert No. 8, Vol 2). If Burma's economy is so poor that this kind of assistance is needed, how can they afford to purchase over US\$1 billion in arms from China? It may be that legally Burma is not an LDC, but has created false documents to achieve that status for the benefit of its military. The United Nations would be well advised to review this situation. But as the military grows, the people's suffering also grows. Reports from foreign organizations visiting Burma suggest that there is serious malnutrition and related diseases causing a high rate of infant and maternal mortality. One report also stated that a serious deficiency of Vitamin A exists and that almost half of the loss of hearing and speech in children in Burma is caused by iodine deficiency.

help. Only a serious national plan for using the resources available in the country for the improvement of the quality of life of the people can bring prosperity to the country. The military, which is fighting for its own survival, can never come up with such a national plan. This much needed plan can best be drawn up by a civilian government which makes use of the many highly trained and skilled people in Burma. First Joint Venture Bank Slorc opened the first joint venture bank with a private businessman on October 1, 1991 in Rangoon. The bank was named Mynmar Citizens Bank Ltd., and has US\$153.85 million as capital. Slorc owns 45% of the total capital investment. This move is not surprising. Slorc recently set up the Union of Mynmar Foreign Investment Commission (UMIF) to gain a monopoly over joint venture contracts with foreign companies. It is through these institutions that the military will continue to keep control over the economy of Burma. The open door economic policy which Burma has announced to the world has yet to become a reality.

[Return to Top](#)

What Lies Ahead?

This is the second article in a series which attempts to provide some perspective on the struggle for democracy in Burma. This article looks at the military, its role in the recent past, and what kinds of problems lie ahead as Burma tries to change from military dictatorship to democracy.

The Military

For centuries, Burma was ruled by an absolute monarchy. Although the British abruptly brought about an end to this system in 1886 by banishing king Thibaw and his wife queen Suppyalat to India, today Burma is ruled by "the man who would be king". Ne Win controls every aspect of life in Burma, and it is through the military, which he has so effectively organized as his totally obedient puppet, that he has kept his fist firmly over the people of Burma since 1962. It is impossible to discuss the future of Burma without looking at the military. It has so dominated recent Burmese history that it will be a difficult force to deal with even once the civil war is ended. Before British colonialization the Burman king was in constant tension with many of the ethnic groups over whom he tried to enforce his rule. The area today known as the country of Burma was never fully unified under the king. However, colonial rule changed that very quickly. The Burman king was replaced by the British power, and this power demanded homage from every group be they Burman or ethnic minority. The British established an administrative system which was totally foreign to the people of Burma, including a system which exerted more control over the minorities through the central authority. As time went on, the British showed more favor to many of the ethnic minority groups, allowing them more chances for education and participation in the military and administrative structures. This was not unnoticed by the ethnic Burmans who made up the majority of the population. In 1948 the British granted independence to Burma. The process of independence was one in which the British tried to arrange for at least some autonomy for the major ethnic minorities living in the mountainous regions along the edge of Burma. Events leading up to and following independence, however, thwarted those arrangements.

General Aung San, leader of the struggle for independence from the British and the one man who seemed able to bring the various ethnic groups together, was assassinated in 1947. U Nu, who then became prime minister, began a process of Burmanization in which ethnic Burmans were moved into major positions in the military. Tensions grew, both within the major party called the Anti Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL) and between the government and some of the ethnic minorities, especially the Karen who felt betrayed and alienated. As splits within the AFPFL increased, and civil war loomed, U Nu turned power over to General Ne Win in 1958 for two years during which political parties could regroup and rebuild, and the nation could be pulled back together. The elections which followed this period again brought U Nu back into power. violently around the country, General Ne Win staged a sudden military coup in 1962 in which he placed the country under the control of a Revolutionary Council. The Council was made up of 17 men, all key military figures with extreme loyalty to Ne Win.. They gave Ne Win full executive, legislative and judicial authority. They also eliminated all legal barriers to military rule by arresting all central government officials, dissolving the high and supreme courts, dissolving the parliament and suspending the constitution. Very quickly Ne Win began reshaping things in the country. Any leaders in the military who were of ethnic minority origin were removed. Only ethnic Burmans were placed in these important positions. Ne Win also established a structure which placed military people in all positions of authority from the top all the way to the village level. These military men were totally loyal to Ne Win as they gained much profit from their positions. They reported everything happening in their area to Ne Win who, in turn, made certain that these military men could purchase necessities and other consumergoods at special military shops. They could also earn special profits from business deals (in gems or opium) in the areas over which they had authority, making it possible for them to become quite wealthy in a country whose economy was declining at an alarming rate. The foot soldiers recruited into the military were mostly poor and uneducated rural boys who desperately needed money for their families. Few other jobs were available to them. Their loyalty to Ne Win and his Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was economic rather than ideological. His control over them was without doubt. Dissention of any kind was dealt with quickly and brutally. Prisons were quickly filled with those who would dare to speak out against Ne Win or any of his BSPP policies. Street protests, of which there have been many, were met with brutal military force, leaving thousands of people, mostly students, dead and crippled. Within months after the coup, Ne Win also began nationalizing all production, distribution, import and export industries. Burmans from the military were placed in charge of these industries. About two thousand skilled civil servants who could probably have effectively developed Burma's economy, were removed from their jobs and replaced by military men with little skill or knowledge.

Ne Win's BSPP, the only political party allowed in the country, was also made up mostly of military people. As head of the BSPP, Ne Win could easily control all that happened in the political realm. All elections were arranged so that "trusted" people would win. The BSPP itself would nominate candidates for election, and the people

simply had the right to vote in favor of them or against them. People jokingly referred to these elections as "selections", and for the most part they knew that their vote made little difference. Most elections resulted in overwhelming support for the BSPP candidates no matter how the people actually did vote. By 1965, Ne Win had also taken moves to close Burma off to the outside world. Schools, hospitals, and all other institutions were degradation of the services these institutions offered. Each institution had an Officer on Special Duty (OSD) appointed by the BSPP who made certain that the institution ran according to Ne Win's wishes. There have been many revolts against this militarization of every aspect of life in Burma. Each time Ne Win has responded without hesitation. His military is well trained and ready to follow orders. The biggest threat, however, came in 1988 when the uprising became nationwide and even involved members of the Air Force and Navy. Ne Win and his BSPP were forced to make some changes. However, their changes are cosmetic for the most part. Elections, which resulted in a massive win for the opposition NLD party have not been recognized by the military, and over 60 opposition leaders have been jailed. Others have fled to the border areas to escape arrest and imprisonment. The military has also made a pretence of opening up the country to private investments, but in reality most joint ventures with foreign countries or companies stay in the hands of the military.

Profits gained through these investments have been used to build up the strength of the military rather than develop the nation's devastated economy. The Planning Department of the Ministry of Planning and Finance in Rangoon reports that defence expenditures of the nation's total budget have increase from 12.5% in 1988 to 31.8% in 1990/91. In reality it might be even much higher than this, and some independent analysts place defence spending closer to 50%. The army itself has been enlarged. In 1988 it numbered about 180,000 and that has now been increased to 220,000. Some observers believe that the military hopes to build up a fighting force of 500,000 soldiers within a few years. New military hardware has been purchased including jet bombers, long©range artillery and more modern navy boats and tanks. A recent purchase from China cost the country over US\$1 billion, 30% of which was paid in cash through a Singapore bank. Why this tremendous increase in the military? Definitely not for national defence. Burma has no real enemies on its borders. The purpose for this military buildup can only be to preserve its own power against threats from its own people. This is one of the big issues an end to the civil war must contend with. Dismantling this military system which permeates absolutely every aspect of life in the country will not be an easy task. The new constitution will have to clearly limit the powers of the military to only that of national defense. At the same time, a police force, outside the control of the military, will have to be developed which can effectively handle internal matters. They will have to be strong enough to work independently of the military. It will also be necessary to integrate the armies of the various ethnic minority groups into the overall military system. This can either be done by creating one army made up of members from all ethnic groups and limiting its size, or by creating national guard forces in each ethnic area. parliamentary system. However, the future of democracy in Burma will depend, to a large degree, on how effectively the newlyelected government will be able to demilitarize the country, and move the military back into their barracks. Splits within the military ranks are a distinct

possibility as the present structure relies almost totally on the one man "who would be king". Should he completely disappear from the scene, internal fighting could erupt. This could result in bitter fighting resulting in further suffering of the Burmese people. If the elected civilian government would now be allowed to take over the country and begin the process of demilitarization, the change might be much smoother and less bloody. It could also help prevent the replacement of one "man who would be king" with another, and there are plenty of top military leaders who probably aspire to such a position.

[Return to Top](#)

On the Brink of Hell

I was born on February 3rd, 1970. I began my primary education in 1975 in Taung Gyi Burma and passed the 7th standard in 1982. I married and had one child. My husband died in 1990 and our family faced many financial problems. In order to solve our economic crisis, I decided to travel out of our town to look for work. When a woman named Pi Soe, who was living in our ward, told me that she would help me find a job, I was much interested. This confirmed my determination to travel. We came to Tachilek (a Burmese town on the Thai/Burma border, opposite Mae Sai) on Monday, August 8. In Tachilek Pi Soe handed me over to an elderly woman whom she called "mother". Only after I got to Bangkok did I learn that Pi Soe received 17,000 baht from that elderly woman for me. After staying in that old woman's house for eight days, I was sent to a brothel in Bangkok where I was forced to work as a prostitute. I refused to do this work and I was beaten and raped by the guards. On October 17 I will be exactly one year here in the brothel. In case of sickness I am not given medical treatment. Whenever I ask for some money, I am scolded. The owners never bring a doctor to see us. Sometimes we are visited by a lady medical worker, but she does not give us enough medicine. For two months already, I have been coughing. I am never allowed to walk outside. I do not know what Bangkok looks like outside of this brothel. Sometimes I get extremely homesick for my child and my parents. I have no idea how they are now. I can not contact them. I can not write Burmese or Thai properly. Please rescue me this month. My sister who is 20 years old also wants to get out of this brothel. Once I tried to run away, but I was caught. The guards cursed me and beat me. Then they locked me up. This was in September of this year.

Whenever I plead with them to let me leave, they say that they will only let me go if my parents personally come and get me. This is impossible. I would like to appeal to any elderly people to come to the brothel and try their utmost to rescue me."
(from an interview on October 9, 1991)

"I accompanied a woman named Nan Soe from Mae Sai because she told me that I would get a job in Bangkok as a knitter in a small factory. Only when I came to Bangkok did I learn that I was not to work as a knitter, but that I had to sell my own body. I learned that Nan Soe sold me for 35,000 baht. Although I want to go back home, I do not know how to go. was never allowed to get outside, I live in complete darkness. Please help us escape from this place." (translation from a letter smuggled out of the brothel) After receiving the above two letters, a Thai NGO was contacted, and with their help the brothel in which these two young women were kept locked up was raided. Thirteen young women were freed. Eleven were from ethnic minority groups in Burma and two were from China. Some had been brought to Bangkok at the age of fourteen. All had been used daily for the sexual pleasures of men, and were never allowed to leave the brothel. It was a prison to them. Speaking very little Thai, and unaware of their location or how to get back to their homes, they were truly living on the brink of hell. The sex business in Thailand has steadily grown and expanded since the American war in Viet Nam brought thousands of US soldiers to Thailand for rest and relaxation. This sex business is now closely related to tourism which is Thailand's largest foreign income earner. It is also earning Thailand a tremendous number of problems which will affect the country socially and economically for many generations to come. Now Thailand is finding ways to export this sex business and its related problems to its neighbors. No one knows how many young women from the various ethnic groups in Burma have been brought into Thailand to be sold as sex slaves. The business is lucrative. To date a small number of brothels have already been raided which were using mostly young girls from China and Burma as forced prostitutes. One can only imagine how many more such places exist all over the country of Thailand, and the number of young girls who have been ripped away from the security of their homes and families and forced to destroy themselves for the sexual pleasures of visiting men. The effect this is having on Burma is terrible. The suffering these young girls and their families must go through as victims of this system is unmeasurable. But Thailand is not only exporting their sex business to Burma. They are exporting some of their more serious problems as well. Almost all of these young girls tested HIV positive for the AIDS virus. Torture of Monks Refugees fleeing a village called Chaungsone which is situated between Tavoy and Kalane Aung have recently arrived near the Thai/Burma border. They report that Chaungsone Sayadaw (the abbot of Chaungsone) was recently seriously tortured by military troops of the Burmese army. According to these refugees, Chaungsone Sayadaw always provided shelter and help to needy people who came by. This included students, local Mon and Karen people, as well as soldiers from the Burmese army. In August, soldiers under the command of Captain Min Shwe Oo from the 104th Burma Infantry Regiment came to the monastery. They charged the abbot with helping "dissidents" and stripped him naked in front of the village people. His body was slashed with a sharp against it

were cursed and kicked. Chaungsone Sayadaw was tied, naked, to a tree. The refugees did not know if he had survived the torture. A similar incident has been reported from a town called Kanbauk. Ashin Setkane Dawara, a well known local monk, was also arrested, slashed and had salt rubbed into the wounds. He was tied naked to a tree for about one hour. Later he was taken to Tavoy prison and his fate is unknown.

[Return to Top](#)

The Nobel Peace Prize

The 1991 Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi for her commitment to peace, justice and human rights in Burma. The prize not only represents the work and sacrifice which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has made, and continues to make, for the cause of freedom and peace in Burma, but it also symbolizes the tremendous sacrifice many thousands of other people in Burma have willingly made in order to struggle for a better future for the country. Throughout the history of Burma, there have been many examples of the sacrifices made by people involved in nonviolent struggle for change. For the most part, these sacrifices have gone unnoticed to the outside world. The awarding of this Nobel Peace Prize helps to highlight these courageous contributions, both from mass movements as well as from committed individuals, which have been made for the cause of peace and justice. One such example is of an elderly woman who participated in the 1974 vote on the new constitution presented to the people by the

military regime. Most of the people felt the constitution was only an attempt by the military to legitimize their power over the people, but the voting system discouraged them from expressing their true feelings on the constitution. The voting booth consisted of a narrow curtained area with two ballot boxes in it. The white box, placed near the entrance to the booth was for affirmative votes. The black box in the rear of the booth was for negative votes. Anyone walking to the rear of the booth to place their ballot in the black box could easily be identified by anyone watching from the outside. Therefore, most people feared casting a negative vote for fear of reprisals by the military. This elderly woman, however, decided that her negative vote must be cast. She walked to the rear of the booth and placed her ballot in the black box. However, when the votes were counted that night, the

election committee announced that there was 100% support for the new constitution. While most people remained silent, feeling helpless to speak out

against the military's manipulation of the voting, this elderly woman persisted in her desire to have her voice heard. She walked directly into the local office of the military and demanded to know what happened to her vote. The announcement that 100% of the people had supported the constitution must be wrong, she reasoned, for she herself had voted against it. She was arrested, and has not been heard from since. There are also many stories of political prisoners who have continued their campaign for human rights in Burma despite severe torture and long terms in solitary confinement. Before the infamous Cocos prison island was closed, it housed thousands of political prisoners in extremely inhuman conditions. On many occasions some of the prisoners chose to go on hunger strike in order to bring attention to these inhuman conditions. It was not uncommon for some of these striking political prisoners to finally give up their lives, refusing to take food unless justice was accorded their comrades. Many of their names are unknown to prison permanently being closed. In 1988, young students from the middle schools often marched at the front of demonstrations. When confronted by the armed military, they pled for peace and an end to the violent mentality which pitted guns against unarmed people. In some cases their courage resulted in confusion among the military and withdrawal. Other times, however, the military fired into the marchers. When the shooting stopped, the streets would be littered with the bodies, many of them children wearing their green and white school uniforms. Despite these terrible experiences, the students would return to the streets again and again, calling for peace, human rights and democracy, their hands holding no weapons. These are the people whom Daw Aung San Suu Kyi symbolizes. Her courage in facing soldiers who had orders to shoot to kill, her determination to speak truthfully and straightforward, and her tenacity in holding to her convictions are traits which many other people in Burma have demonstrated, and this is what the Nobel Peace Prize honors. Now Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest for more than two years. The military regime has extended that detention for another three years. More than anything else, the military fears the voice of hope, courage and challenge which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi represents in Burma. This is why they are so desperate to silence it. There are more than 10,000 political prisoners in the prisons of Burma today. The military has also felt it essential to silence their voices. There is evidence that at least ten of these political prisoners who were in leadership positions in opposition political groups, have been killed while in prison. In the villages of the country, there are hundreds of thousands of families who are essentially prisoners in their own country, unfree to work, think or act as they desire. The civil war waged by the military is an attempt to silence their voices which also call for peace, human rights and justice. As the world celebrates the granting of the Nobel Peace Prize to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, she, along with all the other people of Burma are not free to celebrate. If peace is to finally come to Burma, the release of all these political prisoners is essential.

[Return to Top](#)

