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The Dry Season Offensive in Mergui-Tavoy

A member of B.U.R.M.A. recently traveled through the Margue/Tavoy area of the Karen State to find out the situation of villagers there who are facing the Burmese military's present dry season offensive. Part of his report follows.

The Burmese military has launched their dry season offensive in this area with appalling impact on the lives of the local Karen villagers. The area is more than 33 square miles in size and is made up of 17 villages. The offensive began on September 8. More than twenty thousand villagers have been forcibly evicted from their villages by Burmese troops and moved to an area under the control of the military. Here they have had to build small huts along a road which is used continually by Burmese military vehicles. They are confined to this area by barbed wire fences and guards. Even though their rice crops were ready for harvesting,

they have not been allowed to return and harvest rice for food. Thus they are facing serious problems of starvation and disease.

A few villagers who were able to escape the enclosed camp reported that at least four adults and six children die each day from lack of food and medical treatment. They also report that about thirty Karen women have already been raped by Burmese soldiers. Many of the villages were also burned to the ground by the military and all the possessions of the people confiscated. The military claims that the villagers are sympathetic to the Karen National Union (KNU), whom they consider insurgents, and therefore the villagers must be moved in order to isolate them from the KNU. This strategy is similar to the "free fire zones" established in Viet Nam by US forces in the 60's. Only two villagers remain in the area now. One is U Zargara, a 60-year-old monk who refused to leave his monastery. The second is a Karen woman named Daw Lone from Kyauk Aii village who is over 70 years old. She told the soldiers, "This is my house. I built it myself and I will die here in it. If you think it is necessary, you can kill me now, but I will not leave!"

Not all villagers are lucky enough to simply be forcibly evicted to these concentration-like camps. Many have been tortured and killed under suspicion of having close links to the KNU. Saw Sein Palt Po was a 28-year-old Karen farmer from Tha Pyu Chaung village in Tavoy District. He is married with one small child. On September 2 of this year, he was arrested on suspicion of having links with the KNU. Friends of Saw Sein Palt Po say that he is only a simple farmer and has no membership in any organization. He was heavily tortured by Burmese army troops from company no. 1, 2, and 3 of infantry regiment no. 25 under the command of Lt. Col. Aung Thein Win. The torture continued throughout the day. Villagers said they heard his terrible screams of pain, and his constant pleas that he was not an insurgent. He could not speak Burmese, so his cries were all in Karen and thus not understood by his torturers. Finally Saw Sein Palt Po lost consciousness and was dumped into a shallow fox hole. Even though not yet dead, his body was covered with dirt and he suffocated to death. Ko Hla Myint also was violently killed by Burmese troops. He is a 30-year-old Burmese farmer from Taung Pyauk village in Tavoy from Burmese army infantry regiment no. 101, led by Maj. Soe Tint tortured Ko Hla Nyint, trying to force him to admit that he had contacts with the KNU. Finally they tied his hands behind his back, covered his head with a plastic bag and threw him into the river. His neighbors later discovered his body along the shore of the river where it had washed up. According to the military's newspaper, THE WORKING PEOPLE'S DAILY, Slorc troops killed 24 insurgents during their operations in the area. However villagers in the area all confirm that of the 24 people killed, only two were involved in military activities. The remaining 22 were village farmers who simply got caught by the military and executed. Another execution was reported to have taken place in a detention cell in Tavoy town. Zaw Thet Hla, a Karen farmer and father of five children was arrested on October 8 and

tortured severely for three days. On October 11, Captain Moe Thu entered the cell and shot him to death.

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Abuse of Porters

As the Burmese military's offensives begin, there are an increased number of reported cases of porter abuse. People, often poor daily laborers, are collected by the soldiers and forced to carry heavy loads into battle zones. Many of these porters do not survive the ordeal, dying from disease, lack of food, or from being caught in the middle of the fighting.

Maung Zaw Win is a 25-year-old man from Moulmein who was picked up by soldiers on August 1 of this year. He worked as a baggage man in the Mattaban railway station where he earned a small income to

support himself and his family. He is married and has a son who is five years old.

During an interview, he described his arrest and the abuse he and his fellow porters suffered in the jungles. "After loading some baggage onto a train at the Mattaban railway station, I was sudden surrounded by the police and arrested. Theysaid that it was necessary for me to give voluntary service to the military. I, together with seventeen others, was locked up in the Paung police station. At about noon, a group of soldiers led by Captain Myint Shwe who is a company commander of the 118 battalion of the 44th division, came to the police station and collected us. We were put together with several other groups of "volunteers" and then numbered more than seventy. The military began moving us to the frontline.

When we reached PaingKyon village in Hlaingbwe township, we were order to start carrying heavy bundles of military goods. I was given six 81mm mortar shells to carry. After walking for a long time, we came to the foot of Kalarma mountain. I was no longer able to carry my load and informed the soldier who was guarding my group. He became angry with me and hit me with the butt of his G-3 rifle. Then he pointed his G-3 at me and threatened to shoot me if I did not continue.

Four members in the group finally physically gave out and collapsed on the ground. The soldiers surrounded them and began beating and kicking them. Finally, when the four remain motionless, the soldiers covered them with burlap bags and we continued our journey. Our entire journey was carried out in this inhuman way. As for food, we were given a little rice and boiled beans, but it was never sufficient to fill our stomachs. We felt hungry and weak all the time.

When the heavy monsoon rains fell, we had to put up shelters for the soldiers, but we had to sit in the rain without any shelter. Finally, on August 8, we came to Hill 700 which is opposite the Thai village of Maela. This is where we finally made camp. We were given odd jobs to do such as chopping and collecting firewood, collecting vegetables from the forest and carrying water. Twice a month we had to carry rations to two other military units in Kyaunk Taung and Georgyi.

After some time, the soldiers seemed to gain some confidence in us and we were allowed to go fetch water without an army escort. So one day I and a friend named Tin Tun Naing from Rangoon, decided to him down the river and I never saw him again. I continued to swim and finally reached the shore at the Thai village of Maela. I village authority interrogated me and then sent me to Mae Tan jail. After three days there, on August 14, I was sent to Maesod.

From the first day that I was in Maesod jail, I began to get sick from malaria. When I reported my illness to the police with the help of another prisoners who could speak Thai, the policemen simply asked if I had any money. Since I had nothing, the policemen just said I would have to die in the cell, and then left. However, that night they gave me some medicine called 'Ha Htan Kyaing' which is a cure for headache.

On August 18, some of the Thai prisoners ordered two Burman inmates to clean up all the human waste which had collected. The names of the two Burmans were Ko Lin and Ko Tin. The two refused to do the work and a policeman handcuffed them

to the iron bars of the jail. A second policeman who had double stripes on his uniform, gave his baton to the Thai prisoners and told them to beat the two Burmans. The two beat the Burmans until they became tired. The two Burmans were kept handcuffed to the bars from four in the evening until midnight. Only then were the handcuffs removed and they were allowed to lie down.

On August 20, a Muslim prisoner who also had malaria, became very serious. When his condition got very serious, some policemen came and carried him out of the jail. Just as he was being carried out the door of the jail cell, he died.

I was also getting very serious. Sometimes I went unconscious, and I could not eat anything. About fifteen days after being put in the Maesod jail, I went into a coma. When I woke up, I was in the Maesod hospital. The policemen had sent me there because they thought I was dying.

I was given some transfusions and IV drip for five days. Then a nurse came and gave me a bill for 3700 baht. When I replied that I had no money at all, the nurse gave me some pills and sent me out of the hospital.

I asked them which was I should walk to get to the Thai/Burma border town of Myawaddy, and walked slowly in that direction. As I was still sick, and very weak, I became tired and decided to sit down for a short rest. A Burmese student who stays in a small clinic nearby saw me and asked me to come there. Now I can stay in this clinic and get some treatment as it is run by good friends."

Note: Another report indicates that sometime in August there was an escape attempt made by prisoners in the Maesod jail. Policemen fired on the prisoners who were trying to run away and three will killed on the spot. Nearly thirty finally escaped, but twenty of them were eventually recaptured.

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Economics of Resettlement

Rangoon's new "Satellite Towns" were set up in order to relocate squatters and clean up Rangoon. It was also a way of punishing those communities which were very active during the 1988 uprising. The cost has been high. The budget set aside for three of the satellite towns was over nine million kyats. Yet almost no infrastructure facilities such as roads, hospitals, schools, water and electricity were provided by the military. At the same time, resettled people had to purchase their new plot of land themselves. Daily wage earners have no possibility of paying the price required so many ended up selling their plots off to more well to do people. About ninety thousands plots were divided up for half a million people. The total area required by the three satellite towns is approximately 149 square miles. This land, including at least seven thousand acres of paddy fields was confiscated from the native peasants without any compensation. Thus they lost their inheritance as well as their livelihood.

Pepsi Malnutrition has recently been reported in Rangoon. Malnutrition in a nation's capital city is an appalling thing, and for Rangoon this is probably the first time in history that such a report has been made. But it is a fact, and reports from people leaving Burma suggest that although food was once plentiful, many people are now eating rice soup rather than boil rice as they simply can not afford to pay the prices demanded for rice and other food items. The per capita income for the nation is only US$200 a year, making Burma one of the ten poorest countries in the world. In the case of civil servants, the minimum wage is around 500 kyats per month. At the official exchange rate of 6 kyats per US$1, their salary is equal to about US$83 per month or US$996 per year. However the market value of the kyat is more like 100 kyats per US$1. This means that the actual value of the monthly salary is really only US$5 making the years take home pay to be not more than US$60. Non civil servants receive less than this, and rural workers face even a more desperate economic plight. In such a situation, one would expect authorities to concentrate on investments which would help increase food production, especially the production of foods high in vitamins and protein. Burma can produce more than enough food to feed its population of about 41 million people. However, foreign companies investing in Burma now are doing little to increase the availability of healthy and nutritious foods. Instead, companies such as Pepsi Cola are setting up factories and producing a soft drink which provides little more than sugar and caffeine to its consumers. In August of 1991, Pepsi opened a US$3 million bottling facility in Burma according to "The Journal of Commerce". Initially the plant will be able to produce about 360 million bottles of soft drink each year. With Pepsi's high pressure advertising ability, it will not be surprising if the urban people, especially the Although the investment

is a joint venture with a "private investor" there is little doubt that it is the Burmese military which will profit the most. They will make use of the profits gained through this investment to purchase more weaponry from countries like China and Singapore. These weapons will be used to quell any disturbances created by students in Burma who are, ironically, one of Pepsi's major target groups. A press relations manager at the Pepsi headquarters was quoted by "The Journal of Commerce" as saying, "We don't invest in governments or political systems. We invest in people, and people are consumers, and consumers are basically the same the world over." Barry J. Shea, company vice president for Southeast Asia also justified this investment by saying, "I don't feel guilty. We are bringing a little bit of enjoyment to the people and hopefully at a reasonable cost. I think it should be better for all."

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What Lies Ahead

This is the third in a series of articles which attempts to provide some perspective on the struggle for democracy in Burma. This article looks at the 40-year long civil war, some of the roots of this conflict, and suggests some things which must be done to end the civil war and prepare the way for true democracy to grow in thecountry.

Ending the Civil War

Democracy, in the form of elections and a new constitution, will not necessarily end the forty-year-old civil war in Burma, but seriously working at identifying and solving the root causes of that civil war will most certainly help to begin the process of building a foundation for true democracy in the nation. It should not be overlooked that the present civil war actually began during Burma's democratic era following independence from Great Britain. The Panglong Agreement, signed on February 12, 1947 between General Aung San and many of the non-Burman (ethnic minority) leaders, was a general agreement that the non-Burmans, especially the Shans, Kachins and the Chins, would cooperate with the interim government of Burma so that freedom and independence could be more rapidly achieved. They signed this

agreement because they believed that General Aung San, himself an ethnic Burman, was understanding of their fear and mistrust of Burmans, and would work with them to establish a truly federal system for the country in which they could enjoy a large degree of independence and self-government.

Unfortunately General Aung San was assassinated before a new constitution could be completed, and before the British granted full independence on January 4, 1948. One reason for the assassination probably was directly linked to the fear of other top Burman leaders that General Aung San was giving too much participation to the non-Burman groups in the country. This view is supported by the rapid Burmanization process which began almost immediately after General Aung San's death and after independence, and which eventually left the non-Burman groups with little if any role to play in administering the country. The 1948 constitution, although giving some of the minorities the right to secede from the Union after ten years if they were not completely satisfied with their situation, did not really provide equality between the minority groups and the majority Burmans. The central government was made up of a Chamber of Deputies which was Burman-dominated and which held all power. The Upper Chamber of Nationalities was composed of 53 Burman and 72 non-Burman members and basically had no power in administrative matters. This meant that the various minority States had little or no say in political issues in the country, let alone any military issues. Many of these minority groups immediately became suspicious that they were to be kept subservient to the Burman majority and that they would even have little say in how their own states were governed.

Feeling that there was a rapid trend towards Burmanization of the country, and feeling increased racial discrimination against them, several minority groups, in particular the Karen, Arakanese, Mon and PaO, turned to armed revolt. Between 1958 and 1960, during Ne Win's caretaker government, the ethnic uprising also moved into the Shan and Kachin areas.

Distrust between the minority groups and the Burmans has a long and complex history. Long before the British formally annexed Burma on January 1, 1886, there was constant conflict between the Burman kings in central Burma and many of the ethnic groups living along the borders. Never was the total territory of present-day Burma a unified country under one monarch during this time. For awhile the British governed their colony by keeping Burma proper and the Frontier Areas separate. However, their goal was to finally unite the country as one nation-state. In the process, they also aggravated many of the racial differences which had existed for so long. Some of the minority groups, such as the Karen, related well with the British while the Burmans developed a stronger and stronger nationalistic passion. During World War II the Burmans sided with the Japanese (at least for a

short time) while most of the minority groups fought alongside the Allies. All of this resulted in greater distrust between the groups.

Thus, when the independent government of U Nu (a Burman) came into power in 1948, and when that government failed to provide full participation for the minority groups as those groups wanted and deserved, the time was ripe for the birth of an insurgency. The major issue was distrust. This distrust was exasperated by a "center state" relationship which was much too focused on the center, leaving the states marginalized. Decisions on taxes, budgets, rights etc, were made by the central government which was

Burman dominated, leaving the states with little or no participation and voice. This increased the fear among the minorities that a process of Burmanization was under way which could eventually eliminate the minority groups entirely from the political arena.

At the same time, the minority villagers were seriously suffering from the ill-disciplined and lawless Burman-dominated Burma Army which roamed about freely in their states. These military men looked at the minorities and their traditional leaders as uncivilized and of a "lesser" nature. Their treatment of and actions towards the minorities reflected this arrogance. The Burman military had almost complete power in the minority areas, and could override all local state officers at every level. There were many reports of rapes, lootings, killings, the razing of villages, abductions, and "disappearances." Anyone who complained about these atrocities was in serious danger of also becoming one

of the victims.

The growth of the insurgency was a result of these issues. It was not an attempt to break apart the union as often claimed by the present military rulers, but rather a reaction against a total lack of participation in decision making, and being subject to inhuman treatment at the hands of the military. When General Ne Win staged his military coup in 1962, he claimed that one of the reasons he had to do this was to keep the union from falling apart due to the insurgency. In reality, the issue of preserving the union was not the key issue, but rather the rights of the minorities to their own way of life and self determination.

If Ne Win carried out the coup in order to end the civil war and minorities and the Burman majority, primarily the ruling body, has become even worse. The civil war has expanded to the point that almost all of the country's resources are being used

by the military to pay for its military efforts to control its own people. Ne Win, through the mass media and the educational system which he totally controls, has tried to keep alive this irrational fear that the minorities wish only to break apart the Union. Through this divide and rule policy, he not only assures his own position of power, but also continues to prevent the minorities from playing any constructive role in building the nation. It is clear then, that the first issue in bringing about an end to the civil war in Burma is to begin dealing with the issues of racism, lack of minority participation in the central government, and lack of the right to some self-government in the ethnic states.

This is not an easy task. It can not be accomplished by simply writing up a constitution, nor by developing a federal state system for the country. It must deal with the feelings and experiences of the people, primarily the peasantry of the minority groups. By responding to their experiences in a sensitive way, and integrating that into the new constitution, a truly democratic structure will begin to emerge in Burma. A lot of emphasis is placed on elections as an expression of democracy. Recently Burma has had another election, and yet the issues of the minorities has not been touched. Although the elections were quite free and fair, it should not be overlooked that the DAB and NDF were not allowed to participate in them, creating again the feeling among many minorities that free participation and a voice in decision making will once again be denied them.

However the DAB and NDF did voice support for the elections and their results since it was the most free election process the country has seen for many decades. It was believed by the DAB and NDF that the NLD, winner of over 80% of the parliamentary seats, might possibly move the country in a direction conducive to settling the long, painful civil war. The transfer of power, though, has not come to pass as people were hoping. The majority of the NLD winning candidates who spoke strongly in criticism of the military rulers, have been arrested and imprisoned while others have fled to the border areas wherethey have established the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). Others have been coerced into agreeing to cooperate with the military agenda for the referendum of the newconstitution and the transfer of power. Slorc's (military) Act No. 1/90 stated that power would be transferred to the civilian government only after the drawing up of a firm constitution and that the elected representatives were responsible for drafting such a constitution. However, with the arrest and detention of those representatives who spoke out for the people's interests, it is foreseeable that the new constitution would be drafted completely by a body of officials who are easily manipulated by the Slorc

regime.

The temporary constitution which the winning NLD drafted in 1990 the ethnic minority issues clearly and specifically. It actually postpones dealing with these issues until a later date. If those issues are once again ignored, the civil war will not end, and all the progress in the struggle to date, could be lost. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, before her detention, consistently pointed out that ethnic minority concerns must be addressed if there is to be a truly inclusive democracy in Burma. The present leadership of the NLD inside Burma seems to be totally ignoring that position, probably because they are under considerably pressure and threats from Slorc. The ethnic minorities will be hesitant to support any political party which is inconsistent in their policy towards minority issues.

A process of identifying the root causes of the present civil war, including the issues of racism, lack of participation and the need for some autonomy in State administration, and a process of dealing with these causes one by one is essential if peace is to come to Burma. This process can only be done within Burma, and it is through this process that a workable democratic system and an acceptable constitution will begin to be forged.

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