Burma Issues

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The Brillant Sun Fades into the Sunset

Shu Maung was born on the 24th of May 1911 in central Burma. In 1929 he entered University College in Rangoon, but dropped out in 1931 after failing one of his exams. During the following years be joined the Dobama Asiayone (Our Burma Association) where he became acquainted with Aung San who was later to lead the country to independence from the British.

During World War II he traveled to Japan as one of the "Thirty Comrades" and received military training. When the Burma Independence Army (BIA) was created in 1941, he joined and then changed his name to Ne Win, which means Brilliant as the Sun. As chief-of-staff in the BIA he actively cooperated with the Japanese Imperial Army to drive the British from Rangoon.

Later the BIA changed sides and helped the allied forces re-enter Burma and defeat the Japanese. Following Burma's independence in 1948 Ne Win held senior military and cabinet posts and in 1958 he served as prime minister of a caretaker government until elections were held in 1960 that brought U Nu back into power. Feeling confident and happy in a significant leadership role, while at the same time frustrated with U Nu's strategy to ease tensions between the government and the ethnic nationalities, Ne Win staged a bloodless military coup in 1962 and took over the reigns of power.

Ruling the country as the chairman of the Revolutionary Council, he made himself state president in 1974 and created an ideology for the country that he called the "Burmese Way to Socialism." By creating a one-party system under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), Ne Win was able to manipulate and control every aspect of the country's life. The Burmese Way to Socialism was socialist in name only and it was Ne Win and the people he mentored to support and protect him that benefited from the rich natural resources Burma contained. Burma was, in fact, a one-party police state and under the 1974 constitution Ne Win would remain party head and national leader until 1988 when he resigned.

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During the years of Ne Win's leadership, the country rapidly disintegrated. The health care and educational systems, which had once been the best in Asia, deteriorated until they could barely serve the people in any proper way. The economy also fell apart until the United Nations finally declared Burma a Least Developed Nation in 1987.

Ne Win's rule was brutal. Thousands of political prisoners languished in overcrowded prisons without access to legal assistance. War against the numerous ethnic nationalities living in border provinces brought much death and suffering to the common citizens.

In 1988 a popular people's uprising brought about an end to Ne Win's BSPP, but not to his harsh form of rule. The uprising was crushed through mass arrests and the killing of as many as 8,000 people, including many school children. Many of those who survived this military operation moved to the distant borders and into neighboring countries where they have continued their struggle for democracy. While Ne Win had retired in early 1988, many people still believed that he maintained control of the country through the people he had personally picked and trained to take his place.

But even dictators with all their arrogant power and wealth do not live forever. On December 5, 2002, Ne Win died at the age of 91, and despite all of his attempts to make himself the hero of Burma, he died virtually alone and friendless. Even the state media, controlled by the very people he had made powerful and wealthy, said nothing of his death - no beautiful eulogies, no music for a fallen hero, not even an announcement. Few people attended his funeral and no monument will be built for people to visit and remember his "service" to the country.

Like dictators everywhere, Ne Win tried to write history so that he would be praised and recognized as a saviour of the nation. His silent and lonely death shows clearly that he was not successful in these attempts. Even those who were

once his friends now want to distance themselves from the man, but they seem unwilling to distance themselves from his policies of despotism for they too want the world to think that only they can save Burma and that they are deeply loved by a majority of the people. It is these events of the past and present that provide us with many important lessons that can help build a saner world if we but learn them. As the history of independent Burma is finally written from a more objective position, these lessons will slowly emerge and it will be clear who are the real heroes of this beautiful and long-suffering nation. But already we can look back on the life of Ne Win and draw two very important conclusions.

First, the present military leaders of Burma who aspire to replace Ne Win in order to gain wealth and power, need to recognise that dictators generally do not die heroes. The monuments and statues they have built to themselves during their lifetimes will most likely be torn down and replaced by symbols of the people's dreams and aspirations. In time, dictators like Hitler, Ne Win and others simply become dirty smudges on the face of history, smudges that are an embarrassment to a world that allowed their arrogance and greed to wreck so much havoc on the lives of innocent people.

The military men who now compete with each other to be the new Brilliant Sun of Burma must know that in time, they too will die as despised villains of the nation unless they drastically change their direction. The people's hope for freedom can be kept down for a time by fear and threats, but it always rises again, and each time it rises it is stronger and more determined. If these new leaders would now listen to this voice and allow the people to bring their own government into power, then they might avoid having to die such a humiliating death as Ne Win has. They have the opportunity and they have the time. Will they learn this crucial lesson from history?

Secondly, the people of Burma can now see that no dictatorship is as powerful and almighty as it at times seems. C.T. Yanghwe once wrote, "Military and authoritarian regimes are, in reality, not very complicated, well-organised, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful entities as many people think. They maintain their power by intimidating the population and by the exercise of arbitrary violence and power — so that, in time, they obtain a psychological hold on the minds of the people. The people — and the opposition — in time come to self-buy into the myth or mythic image of the regime, projected by both the regime and also by those oppressed, albeit quite subconsciously or involuntarily (i.e., through the internalisation of their disoriented and traumatised plight)."

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publications

Burma Issues has a range of publications available to groups or individuals who are interested in Burma and related issues. For further information or to enquire about the recieving of these publications please contact Burma Issues at:

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The publications and postage are free of charge but any donations would be gratefully appreciated.

The New Eye (Burmese, Karen, English)

Cartoon books depicting real-life stories of the marginalised overcoming oppression through peaceful and creative means.

Human Rights Information Manual (English, Burmese)

Designed to teach people how to use information in the struggle for justice, human rights and peace. The manual is a teaching tool and is divided into 3 sections: collection of data, analysis of data and communicating what you have found.

Children's Story Books (Burmese, Karen)

Based on traditional Karen children's stories and used extensively as reading material for children in education facilities in Burma and along the Thai-Burma border.

Kwe Ka Lu (Karen)

A Karen language newspaper distributed to Karen communities in Burma and along the Thai-Burma border. The newspaper aims to keep the Karen people informed on news and culture.

Education for the Development of the Marginalised Karen in Burma (English)

A report on the imadequacies of the current education system in Burma, specifically for the Karen, and how any change to the system needs to be based on an overall development needs for the Karen.

Sai Yai Thai (Thai)

A newsletter that covers issues related to Thai-Burma relations with the purpose of infoming the Thai population of the situation in Burma and to create greater understanding amongst Thai people.

The Shifting Masses

"We have been moving from one place to another every year. The last year and this year have been the most difficult years for us. In the past years, from seeding time to harvest time, the Burmese army troops arrived to our hiding sites very often and every time they arrived they destroyed our paddies. We had to hide from them every time that they arrived". [1]

"It will also be very difficult for them as their traditional and political structure have been broken down and they are turned into refugees. These people are being moved and resettled into areas that do not replicate their traditional structure". [2] (Comment on the Wa population movement from the Chinese-Burma border to the northern Thailand border)

Burma has a population of 50 million people, a good porportion of that number has never had the security, comfort and stability of their own home. A good porportion has been forced into an existence of continual movement that has lasted for over 50 years. There are individual reasons for every individual case that has created this seething mass of movement in Burma. There is also a bigger picture, an ulterior motive to keep the general population of Burma on the move, it is a motive cunningly played out by the Burmese military, not confined to the ethnic areas, not confined to the cities or the democracy movement or the guerilla movements of the ethnic armed groups but a tactic that has kept the entire population in a permanent state of uncertainity, fear and rootlessness.

Whether its forcible relocations of villages in the ethnic areas to cut off the support to the armed groups, land confiscation to construct military bases, relocation of people in urban areas so that development can occur, the mass relocation of the Wa people from the northern to the southern areas of Shan state, the relocation of urban Burmans to the houses and lands of the ethnic Chin, the IDP population that can move from place to place more than 10 times a year, the refugee population in the countries that border Burma, those that are moved to the satellite towns, Burma is a people on the move. What effect has this constant movement had on the people in general and what are the repercussions on Burma's ability to be a successful, stable and productive nation?

The People

The psychological effects of not having a place to call home can be quite intense. Studies have shown that something as simple as never being able to say you have a life-long friend has an adverse effect on people. Of course there are many cases of populations who thrive on constant movement, the gypsies of eastern europe and a friend of mine, who given a cup of coffee and a book, is content to never maintain roots anywhere. Having the choice of this lifestyle is a distinguishing factor though. The general population of Burma are forced to be constantly moving so that no place feels like your home, no place offers security and comfort.

When I asked a friend the reasoning behind this constant movement of people he replied, "When you move you loose something, so when you move all the time you loose many things. If you can't stay in the same place, have stability, then you can't establish things like health and education and social structures. It's psychological." So it is not just material things. Each time you move you loose something, your ability to give your children an education, your ability to provide your family with food, your ability to create a youth group or practice your religion, your ability to create opposing systems to an oppressive regime.

Constant movement also breaks down the family structure. Children are separated from their parents, granny is eventually left behind, the extended family becomes the nucleur family which in time becomes the individual. A friend of Burma Issues has been separated from his family for 8 years after he was forced to flee his home in fear. While the longing to see his family again is intense and painful he knows he can never walk back into his home village and do this. The danger for his own life is enough but the repercussions his presence will have on his family is even more reason to stay away. It is a common scenario for the people of Burma, a huge percentage of the population has been separated from their families, the prospect of ever seeing them again, very dim, children and relatives scattered far and wide.

By being forced to constantly move people are unable to practice their traditions and customs. The Rohingya and Chin Christians from Burma's western border are a good example. Due to constant persecution the people are forced to move to survive. Churches are destroyed, villages forcibly relocated. The bigger pricture is that by the Burmese military disrupting the lives of those people practicing alternative religions (the Burmese military is intent on being a solely Buddhist state) they are lessening the ability of these

people to practice their religions. This effectively destroys peoples ability to perform the basic social practices of their lives.

The institutions

Some of the typical consequences of the forced movement of a population are liability to disease due to the lack of facilities and optimum conditions that would usually combat these diseases and also the exposure to the elements that lack of suitable housing exaceberates. Lack of food: the reducing of opportunities to plant and cultivate your food source and the reliance on substandard food sources which can also lead to nutritional issues. Lack of education: by constantly moving the people are unable to implement simple education curriculums and facilities, resulting in 40% of children never reaching school and only 25-35% actually finishing primary school. [3]

Movement basically erodes the simple social fabrics of everyday life. Structures cannot be implemented with any kind of stability, there's chaos and people loose their direction. The military plays this well for if the people lack direction, if they lack access to the simple structures that would usually benefit them then they also loose the ability to determine who they should be fighting against, who and what is responsible for their current living conditions and how they can best activate an effective response to these conditions. By denying the population the access and stability that basic structures of society should afford they decrease the chances of the population opposing their authoritarian rule.

Lack of stable institutions and structures also creates a disorganised lawless state that is powerless to oppose the military. During the 1988 demonstrations the Burmese regime released thousands of criminals into the population to promote a state of lawlessness that would give the military the opportunity to ride in as knights in shining army to re-install law and order, their part in creating the situation to begin with by releasing the criminals from the prisons seemingly forgotten. The people become not only disorganised but also lack unity and direction.

And yet the very people who created this system of disorganisation are perhaps the only ones who are a part of any form of unification in the country, that of the Burmese military. By keeping the general population on the move they destroyed any hope of a unified resistance to the military power. A disorganised, unstable state plays right into the hands of the Burmese military and while it has been created and maintained by the military the people may be unwitting contributors to the system.

So what does mass movement primarily do? In positive terms it makes people adaptable and creative. By constantly having to fight to survive you create alternative thinking, independent and capable people. For the future of Burma there is potential for a lot of creative, lateral thinking individuals who could possibly push Burma back into a successful, peaceful and democratic country.

Some of the more negative aspects though are the erosion of structures that constant movement causes, the ersoion of ideas of familiarity; having familiar things around you is a common way that human beings cope with trying situations, and the lessening of the chance to practice your culture and traditions.

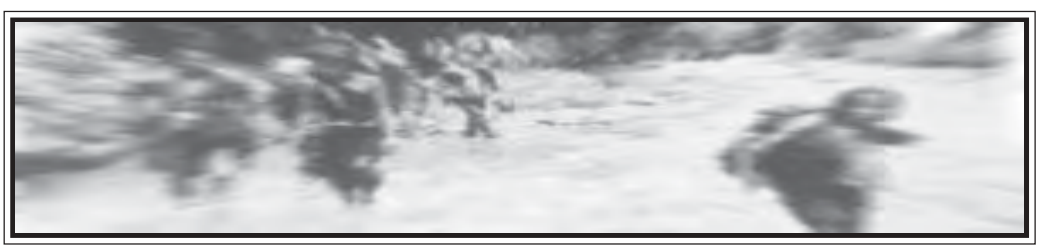
So what of Burma's future?

This mass movement in general needs to be stopped for as Burma stands at the moment when democracy comes, when a fair, free, peaceful and just Burma emerges, social and institutional infastructure will have to begin almost from scratch. Population identity will be warped creating psychological issues as well as hatred and blame between the various ethnic groups. Many groups and individuals are already contemplating these issues but while they continue to be forced to move, denied the stability of living freely, they will never have the opportunity to create nor sustain solutions to these issues. For Burma to emerge as a productive nation the issue of mass population movement and its repercussions is one of extreme importance and one that definitely feeds the current status of the Burmese militaries power.

Tha Lay

Endnotes

1. "A Brutal Reign of Terror", Internally Displaced People News, September 2002
2. "Burmese Resettlement Threatens Thailand", The Nation, 22-01-00
3. "Myanmar's Expenditures on the Military, Health and Education", Nonviolence International, August 2002



For Me I Can Forgive...but

This is the story of a villager from Htan ta bin township, Taungoo district in Burma. Before 1975 the villagers of Htan ta bin were able to enjoy sufficient living from their orchard plantations. Their durian fruits and beetle nuts were famous along with the orchard products from the Taungoo district region. Now along with the villages the plantations are in ruin because of the ethnic cleansing war conducted by the Burmese Military regime. The majority of Htan ta bin villagers are now refugees in Thailand or Internally Displaced People in the eastern mountainous region of Taungoo District.

Nineteen Seventy-Five was the year that the BSPP (Burma Socialist Program Party) led by General Ne Win started launching 4 cuts operations into Karen state and almost all the villages in the Karen hill tracts in Nyaung Le Bin district and Taungoo district were destroyed or deserted in fear. At that time we hoped that we would still be able to live in our village without fear.

In 1978 we were attending a prayer service in our village church. We had heard some information that BSPP troops had plans to set up their camp at our village. Our village is a good place on a hill with plenty of clear water. We all had a similar question in our minds: how were we to live in the future? What are we going to face or suffer?

> For me I am able to forgive whatever the Burmese Military have done to my family and my neighbours. But don't suggest for me to forget it. I fear that it would lead me to break faith to those who have died at the hands of a merciless, inhumane people.

While worshiping in the church we heard some gun-fire followed by explosions. I became scared and unable to sit still. I couldn't hear the gospel news and the hymns because I became very scared of those rumbling sounds. I rose up and fled from the church. At that moment there were some people in front of me and there were also some people rushing out behind me. I ran as fast as I could to my house and when I arrived I saw some of my family members already packing up some things on their backs and running.

The distance between our village and the rumbling sounds may be only 10 to 15 minutes walk. We could not collect what we needed, we could only collect what we could easily see in front of us and flee with it.

As it was the month of August there had been a lot of rain fall and most of the dry streams were filled with rushing water. Most of our villagers were unable to carry umbrellas and waterproof sheets with them. We slept under the thick jungle on the ground. My family were able to bring a piece of waterproof and so we laid it on the ground and let the smaller family members sleep in the middle while the elder people slept around them between our baskets. Some other families had it worse than us. For the whole night rain fell on us, mosquitoes flew around and the leaches from the ground tortured us.

After 7 days the salt and fish paste we brought with us was all gone. Some men went quietly back to our village and searched for salt and fish paste but all those needy food stuffs were found by the government troops and destroyed or taken away. The big jars of salts were broken and spread and mixed with mud. And the jars of fish paste were also the same. We had nothing left to eat.

As the government troops searched the whole area, we had to shift our place every two or three days. Once in the late evening troops approached our hiding area and we had to move to another place in the darkness. With some young children and infants it became more torturous and unsafe. The children became sick and very pitiful. That night our family had to sleep on the wet ground and we the elders had to hold the end angles of the water proof the whole night to protect the weak ones from rain. It was a horrible sleepless night among the cruel insects and roaring rain. The whole night we were bleeding from leach bites.

Close to the end of October the rice in the plantation started to become ripe among the weeds and sprouting bamboos, we had dared not go back to clear the weed. To get some rice to eat we encouraged ourselves and went back to harvest the rice. While reaping the rice our eyes had to scan every visible part of the surrounding area. It looked like we were stealing others' property though we were in our own plantation. We had to thresh off the seed as soon as we finished reaping and carried it far

from the plantation to escape detection.

After working like that for two weeks we heard again about the approaching Burmese troops. We dare not reap the rice in the day time and we decided to reap at night. In the darkness we could not sort out the weed from the rice. As we were reaping in the darkness we had to listen carefully to the sounds from the surrounding area and in our mind we have to think of the way to flee if we hear the strange sound. As for women we dare not think about if we were captured by those troops. After 6-7 days we have to stop reaping and left the grain to fall by itself as we heard the enemy was heading to our plantation.

One day my older sister and I went back to our old rice barn. From our old barn we could see our deserted village from a higher place. As we saw the houses were covered by creepers, vines and fast growing plants we both cried hugging each other but without any words. We knew we suffered the same painful feeling by seeing that scene. But we dare not enter our village.

From our old barn we saw preserved dot fruits in bamboo tube containers. We carried one tube each and came back to our family. As the dot fruits were preserved in salted water all of us enjoyed it in our meals. Even when the dot fruits were all gone we still used the salted water to cook some vegetable soups. Though the odour was unpleasant at least we could enjoy a little salty taste from our meal.

By 1976 we were still living in fear deep in the jungle like wild fowls. The situation grew worse this year. Every one or two days we would hear of villagers being captured and killed. At this time our movements became fearful and we felt scared a lot, more and more we could not avoid the situation. We could hear gunshots closer and closer to us and shortly after the gun shots we would hear about the unfeelingly death of villagers. We wished for these cruel times to pass away as soon as possible.

In February 1976 our deserted village was burnt down and became ashes. Even our left behind domestic animals did not have a place to spend the night. In March, the enemy found our rice barn along with the other 11 villagers' rice barns and burnt them down. We, the family members looked at each other in tears and talked to each other about how to live in the future, there was nothing left to eat.

A few days later when our hopes had gone we were called by a KNLA Commander along with the other 11 families whose rice barns were burnt down. In April the families' representatives arrived to his office and he told them, "There is only one thing to do, go to Pa Deng on the other side of the Salween River to escape from starvation. Do you have some money for the journey?" At that time my father had only 2 kyat and fifty pya and my mother's cousin had only two kyats. For other families they still have some money fit for the journey. After knowing our situation the Commander gave 500 kyats to my family and 500 kyat to the family of my mother's cousin.

Arriving home my father called all the family members together and told us "when we are at the end of hope and our hands cannot reach any further, this 500 kyat is worthier than 50 million kyat. So you, all of my family members must never forget the obligation and grace of this work that has been done for us."

After that we left our hiding place and started following the guide troops. Every day they avoided the enemy posts and led us without any clashes. It took 10 days to arrive to Pa Deng.

Today I still hear of and meet some families who have suffered more than mine. I understand their suffering very well and pray every night that these poverties and suffering be washed from Burma. For me I am able to forgive whatever the Burmese Military have done to my family and my neighbours. But don't suggest for me to forget it. I fear that it would lead me to break faith to those who have died at the hands of a merciless, inhumane people.

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All dictators fall in time. The speed at which they fall depends on the unity and strategy of the people themselves. When they set their fears aside sufficiently to withdraw all support from the dictator, the "monolith" will collapse. The hope, therefore, for the end of military rule in Burma and for the peaceful co-existence of all ethnic nationalities lies with the people themselves. As fear gives way to courageous non-cooperation, the people, from the poorest peasant to the university professor, will be the creators of Burma's future and thus they will be the true heroes.

The Brilliant Sun is gone, but the legacy of suspicion, fear and distrust he created to rule the country remains and continues to keep peace and unity an illusive dream for the people. But that legacy too will one day only be a dirty smudge on the face of history as the people find their own path out of dictatorship and into a peaceful future.

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news briefs

"most successful" trip depsite harrasssment. Despite harassment by local authorities, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi made her "most successful" political tour in the countryside since her release from house arrest seven months ago. "This is the most difficult trip she has ever made. But people still came out to greet her despite threats by authorities. This is the most successful organizational trip by (Suu Kyi)," Lwin, Party Spokesman said. Lwin said authorities in some areas placed trucks, boulders and barbed wire across streets to stop her vehicle, while at others they warned people not to attend her rallies. In Rakhine State, Lwin said, the Nobel Peace Prize winner opened four offices of her National League for Democracy, which is allowed to operate by the junta, although its members have in the past been subjected to arrest and intimidation. "When she addressed the crowd that had gathered to meet her, local authorities played songs and sermons from a tape using a powerful public address system, preventing the crowd from hearing her speak," Lwin said.

"Suu Kyi makes "most successful" trip despite harrassment by authorities", AP, Dec 25

aids sufferers escape sorry plight. Shunned and mistreated by a government which would prefer to pretend they didn't exist, HIV-AIDS sufferers from military-ruled Burma who make their way into Thailand say they escaped a sorry plight in their home country. Ko Lwin Moe, a 37-year-old trader who was diagnosed with the disease two years ago, says he spent a year being treated at a private clinic in the capital in Rangoon before fleeing to Thailand. "I would be dead already if I continued to live in Burma," he told AFP. "The Thai doctors simply treat me as a patient, which makes me very happy. But in Rangoon the Burma medical staff treated me like I was a criminal." After grilling him for details of his financial background to ensure he could pay for treatment, the Burma doctors only gave him antibiotics, and at one point told him "You're going to die some time anyway." The United Nations agency UNAIDS estimates that up to 400,000 people among a population of 48 million is infected with HIV, while independent experts working in Rangoon say the incidence could be twice as high.

"Burma Aids sufferers escape sorry plight in homeland", Agence France-Presse, Dec 23

hundreds fired in mae sot. Some 600 hundred Burmese garment workers in Mae Sot were fired this month after demanding that 40 employees be reinstated who had been terminated for requesting overdue wages as well as a raise, according to the fired workers. The workers said that they were also protesting the amount of monthly leave granted to them by the factory's owner, Yan How. But Mr. Yan, who is from Taiwan and owner of Rian Thong Apparel, said that he dismissed the workers after they took more than the allotted half-day off per month. A half-day off each month does not give the workers sufficient time to buy monthly rations or to remit money back to Burma, says Kyaw Zay Ya, 26, who was released over the weekend. He says they have no choice but to take the bullying from the factory owners because they have no jobs to return to in Burma. Workers complained that Mr. Yan was taking 3 percent of their wages each month for unknown reasons and that he never paid overtime or set a piecemeal rate for knitters.

"Hundreds fired in Mae Sot", Irrawaddy, Dec 16

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