Burma Issues

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Looking to it's Neighbours:
Burma's New Path to Acceptance

The US, Britain and the EU have recently issued renewed calls for Burma to show concerted efforts for political change or face increased sanctions; India, China and Thailand have welcomed with warm embraces an influx of state visits from the Burmese military leaders which has resulted in greater cooperation and economic agreements. It is little surprise then that the Burmese junta seem to be embracing closer economic and trade cooperation with their neighbours, opting to go without the wests support or acceptance, opting for international legitimacy through those that don't impose the strict demands for resolving human rights abuses. Can it work? Is it a new tactic that shows foresight and cunning?

The recent spate of visits involing Burma and its neighbours has seen a flurry of agreements, protocols and understandings on a range of trade and economic issues. In January General's Than Shwe and Khin Nyunt, with their entourages, undertook a six day visit to China. At its conclusion China had offered US$200 million in preferential loans for Burma's economic development, the signing of agreements for cooperation in economics and technology, public health and sports, a US$6 million grant for technological cooperation and the partial cancellation of debt owed by Burma. China also stated its willingness to "encourage competitive and creditable firms to invest in Burma".[1]

January also saw a visit to India by Burma's Foreign Minister U Win Aung. While this visit didn't achieve the same concrete results as the China visit, it did manage to get a protocol of regular bilaterial ministerial consultations and discuss the possible increase of Burma's credit line which already stands at US$25 million. India also expressed interest in greater company investment in Burma.

In February the Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra spent two days visiting Burma where an agreement was made to cooperate in three key areas: border, economic and international affairs. The agreement that Thailand would help with improving Burma's international image shows both the importance the Burmese regime places on this aspect of their power and Thailand's acceptance of the regime as having legitimate international standing. The trade and economic agreements between the two countries is also one of the biggest Burma has. Thai companies are investing in a myraid of development and economic projects, including a seaport in Tavoy, a proposed dam on the Salween River and a highway project between Mae Sot and Rangoon.

The preoccupation of the west on Burma's human rights record has restricted their moves to gain international recognition, the priority of the neighbouring countries is clear and its not about human rights, its about money.

Burma is actively pursuing improved relations with its neighbours and it seems like the neighbours are equally as keen to reciprocate. All of these visits show a growing acceptance of Burma's governing power and an eagerness for greater cooperation in investment and trade. Burma are playing this game to their own benefit, trying to maintain relations with all their surrounding neighbours and not relying on any particular country for sole support. Its a lesson learnt from the past where reliance on China grew to such proportions in the mid-nineties that Burma went to great measures to loosen the hold China had taken over them. Now acceptance seems varied: from Asean, despite continued pressure from the international community, even getting a small amount of EU acceptance by being allowed for the first time to attend the recent EU-Asean summit, from two major powers in the region: India and China, cunningly maintaining interaction with both countries when the relationship between the two has commonly been dogged with distrust, and competiveness, from other major stalwarts in the region, Japan, Malaysia and Australia who have all engaged with the current regime on various levels. By increasing cooperation with these surrounding neighbours do Burma need the support of the west?

To a certain extent Burma's neighbours already have existing trade and economic agreements with the west, China's economic market attracting keen western participation. While China maintains a precarious relationship with the west, they are capable of creating a link to the west that Burma can't achieve directly, China's curent policies more or less being accepted by the

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western world despite its own abmisal human rights record in Tibet, Taiwan and China itself. There is also a certain bond amongst Asian countries against the dominance of western powers who are seen as dictating the rules of market economies. This resistance to western concepts is in part what allows Burma to be more accepted by its Asian neighbours, lending support to what could be called "one of their own".

The Myanmar Times stated "they [Burma and China] share cultural affinities especially in the codes of moral conduct, such as respect for parents, teachers and elders". These cultural affinities which suggest a difference to the West could be seen as the unifying factor for an Asian alternative. The Wests supposed domination over international markets has also unified an anti-west feeling amongst Asian economies. Both China and India's economies are gaining, it not already there, the strength and sufficiency to make themselves non-reliant on western economies, in fact potential competitiors to western economies. The possibility of an east/west divide in ideals, economies and priorities could be a very real one. Burma doesn't need the support of the western world, they no longer have to reply to western demands for democracy and human rights adherances. They can get the needed support from their neighbours, and they can do it while maintaining their current status as the governing power. It's feasible isn't it?

The one thing that seems to be lacking from all these new agreements and discussions on cooperation is the humanitarian issue. China, India and Thailand all face issues regarding population flow and refugees that have fled the continued human rights abuses in Burma. While the west hold these abuses up as indicators of their cooperation with the Burmese regime, these countries who are affected most severley by it seem to deem it an unimportant addition to the agenda. In Thailand's agreement to cooperate on border issues, the 130,000 refugees along the Thai-Burma border were not even mentioned, instead Thaksin said cooperation would cover, "security, drugs problems, and illegal immigrants...".[2] India has a population of approximately 50,000 Chin who have fled Burma into India's neighbouring Mizoram state. Classified as "illegal immigrants" they have fled various human rights abuses and are left with little international attention and no aid support. These countries have all experienced tumultous relations with the west over the years regarding their own human rights abuse situations, having experienced the wests interference at various times they are less likely to give importance to Burma accepting these same demands from the west.

Perhaps by not giving humanitarian issues any credence the recipient countries are allowing themselves manouevrage to dispose of the problem as they see fit and not with the glare of international governments and humanitraian organisations monitoring them. It definitely shows that to these neighbouring countries economics and trade is far more important then the lives of countless human rights abuse recipients.

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Survival Within Division

After five years as an externally displaced person living in Thailand, having fled my home village in southern Burma because of Burmese troops' invasion, this trip was the second time I had sneaked back to my own homeland. I was sneaking back to my own house that someone else now lives in as his own and watches, trying to harm me anytime I return.

Five years ago, we paddled boats onto the rapids, hunted wild chicken on the riverbank, fished in the river and slept at night, talking about our paddy fields and the women we fell in love with. Now I have to walk every step with owl eyes, half asleep and half ready to move at a moments notice.

After the Burmese troop's 1997 offensive against the Karen population in the Tenasserim region where mass forced relocation programs were implemented and the Burmese military set up their bases along the Tenasserim river, the living of the people in the Tenasserim region was destroyed. Some people crossed to Thailand, some people continue to hide in the jungle and some people were forcibly relocated to the Burmese troops designated relocation sites.

Among these different split groups the people who sought refuge in Thailand have a better living but may be not better future expectations. People hiding in Thai border villages, also known as externally displaced people are living in fear of arrest from Thai police as illegal immigrants. People hiding in the jungle inside their own territory are living with constant fear of Burmese troop's operations for search and destroy.

During winter last year I returned to Kamoethway area, a place to the east of Tavoy and to the south of the Yadana gas pipeline. The Karen population here were forcibly relocated to the west bank of the river, close to the new Burmese military bases.

Deserted house in Kamoethway area
BI 2002

Before 1997 the people here lived freely, Burmese troops occasionally arrived in their villages but the area was fully controlled by the KNU (Karen National Union). Some Karen villagers from northern Tavoy areas immigrated or fled to this area because of the Yadana gas pipeline project and the Ye-Tavoy railroad construction.

Since the people were forced to stay in forced relocation sites, they have been facing difficulties with earning their living because of Burmese troops' restrictions. They became targets of torture and execution. Daily survival, to be safe from Burmese troops suspicion, is a daily challenge. Forced labour becomes a regular task for the people although the Burmese military government has pretended to stop forced labour due to ILO pressure. They also have to pay various kinds of extortion.

What about the people in the relocation sites? These people are unlike the internally displaced people hiding in the jungle, refugees in the camps and externally displaced people in Thailand. Those who are displaced in the relocation sites meet with Burmese troops almost everyday. They have to live very carefully under the watchful eyes of Burmese troops and their spies and face continuing human rights abuses. Their stories are rarely learned by the outside world because the areas are difficult to access for outsiders.

How do the people survive in relocation sites when they are facing restrictions, forced labour and extortion all the time? They have survived through debt and poverty. Many villagers I met told me that they get poorer and face debt since they were forcibly relocated. The villagers who were moved from their village to another village are facing more difficulties than the villagers who were grouped into the middle of their village. It is worse for the immigrated villagers who do not have any land. Some villagers in relocation sites are allowed to make rice plantations outside the relocation sites. Even then they do not get enough rice because they were not allowed to go to work regularly, their rice plantations become ruined, their crops eaten by wild pigs, insects, birds and rats. The Burmese troops receive some advantages for letting them go to work. First when they give out the permission paper villagers have to pay 100 kyat for each paper. They are allowed to go for only five days

in a week. The Burmese troops also ask them to report the activities of the KNLA (Karen Nation Liberation Army). If they are seen outside the relocation site without permission papers then they will be harm or killed. This sometimes happens even if they have permission papers.

Before the villagers could make their crops, get enough rice for the year and get money from their betel nut plantation for other needed expenses. Now the income from their betel nut plantations has to replace their rice to eat and to fulfill the extortions demanded by the Burmese troops. Many of them buy rice from the town. The soaring price of rice has affected them and created a harder time for them.

A woman told me about her family's survival. They borrow money from the wholesale store, pay it back after the harvest of her betel nut and then have to borrow again for the next year.

A villager told me, "I have to give more than I earn. To fill this I look for labouring work in other people's gardens and borrow money from friends". Co-dependence on each other helps the villagers survive and the betel nut plantations are a lifeline for survival and paying Burmese troops demands.

How are they controlled? Burmese troops will use many ways to have power over the people and bring them under their full control. One of the problems the villagers are facing is the Burmese troop's tactic to control the villagers by dividing them through creating misunderstanding and distrust amongst the community. Many of the villagers and outsiders are not aware of it. The strong and united community is hard for the Burmese troops to control.

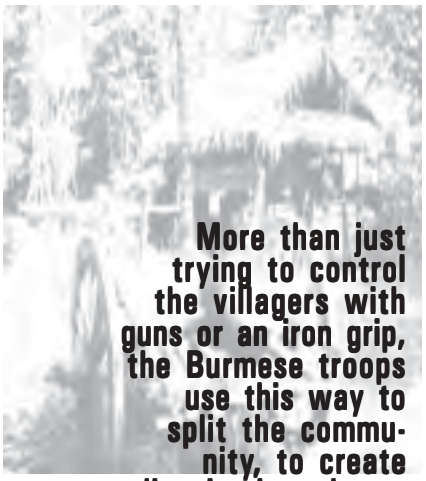
Many villagers I met were afraid that other villagers would learn of our meeting and would report it to the Burmese troops or would spread the news to other villages and they would get in trouble. A villager told me the Burmese troops who arrived to their village did not know the real situation unless the villagers told them.

A man who met me for interview, asked with suspicion why I wanted to meet with him alone instead of with other villagers at the same time. "You call me only without letting other people know if it is safe for me and you."

During my trip, I constantly heard the villagers talking to each other of that village they were afraid of or that person who was fearful. In only a short time of being with them I myself became suspicious of other people and villagers who met with us.

It is difficult for the villagers to unite and stand together to find the way to fight the oppressor or injustice. There are many reasons for this, the villagers who live under Burmese troops are closely watched by the Burmese troops and their spies, they also create different opportunities between communities and another cause may be the formation of the people militia's.

Communities also get different opportunities depending on how they cooperate with the Burmese troops or please them. Many villagers talk about one village that they hate or distrust. I found that village got more freedom for earning their living because more of the villagers try to cooperate with the Burmese troops by forming people's militias. There are also more rich people in the village so they make closer relationships with the Burmese army officers for their business purposes. Unlike before, Burmese troops also use a new way of spying on villagers. When I was there, I heard that Burmese soldiers group up 4-5 people who walk around the village at night beside peoples houses and secretly listen to the villagers talking.



More than just trying to control the villagers with guns or an iron grip, the Burmese troops use this way to split the community, to create disunity in order to keep the villagers from having a choice to find the way to struggle against injustice together.

The forming of people's militias has also created distrust among the community. Villagers fear if they do not follow the Burmese troop's orders or if they give help to the Karen resistance, the people's militia will learn and will report them to the Burmese troops. Some villagers said that the forming of people's militia is also good in some ways because when the Burmese troops patrol with the people's militia and they arrest someone the people's militia can recommend for his/her release. However, they also said some of the people's militia are definitely being used as the Burmese troops' handle. Some people get leadership positions among the people's militia and get the opportunity to extort from the villagers, to hand out punishment and to have power over the community. This causes distrust and hatred amongst the community. It creates conflict between the Karen soldiers and the people's militia as well.

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Resolving Conflict Through Peace

I arrived to Burma Issues in the middle of 1994. Two people gave me the chance to learn about Burma without thinking about the conflict between Thailand and Burma as most Thais have memorised it from the history books. It was not an obstacle for me to work on the conflict in Burma because peace and justice work do not belong to a specific nationality who have responsibility to build and serve it. How can we feel secure if our neighbors are insecure? Therefore I could not ignore this problem or just think about my own country when the people in Burma are suffering from a civil war that has existed for many decades and a human rights situation that is still not improving. Human rights abuses in the ethnic areas are still strong and in the city the Burmese people are facing many economic problems. These continue to have an effect on Thailand in terms of refugees and migrant workers that come to Thailand from Burma. The Thai government has been trying to deal with these people but never with much success as they never care about the human rights aspect. The recent government is quite successful in building the relationship with the junta because Thaksin has the policy to clean all the anti-military and opposition groups from Thailand. I do not want to use the word anti-government because the rulers in Burma are an illegal and illegitimate governing body.

The same as most people around the world I never had the idea about the ethnic issues in Burma. The first time I am aware of the problems in Burma was in 1988 when I joined with the Thai student union to protest the dictatorship in Burma after they killed many people, and many students had to flee to Thailand. This event shocked people around the world and the international community started to sanction and boycott the junta. Education and history teaches us to be familiar with an individual hero or heroine that has a higher education background but few people try to look for the hero or heroine from the ground, from the people who are always facing the direct problem. It is no surprise therefore that most people only know Aung San Suu Kyi as a woman that fights for democracy in Burma. How about the villagers all over Burma that have to fight to overcome fear from beneath the military's boots by seeking to hide in the jungle to save their lives, to be continously rebuilding their homes and struggling against oppression? Most people think of them as victims and to help them they think only of changing the military regime to one that represents democracy. Nobody is trying to encourage the majority of people that are facing the problems in Burma to participate in the change of Burma.

Childrens games and responsibilities for conflict resolution
Pi Boong 2002

After I arrived to Burma Issues I have learnt more about the conflict in Burma and have been studying more about peace and justice. Through this work it reminded me why I chose to work for peace. I think our backgrounds lead us to see things in a particular way. Therefore I would like to go back to when I was a child, the events that effected what I believe and why I need to be able to see people in this world live together in peace. I was a witness to physical violence, or as the peace researchers say direct violence, in my family. In fact this type of violence is similar to any war in this world because we can see clearly who is using the violence and who is effected by this violence, the only difference coming from the level of the problem. In the case of my problem it started from the family level but for the Burmese people it has started at the national level, both ending up with the same solution of using a physical form of violence. To me it seems like conflicts are natural because they exist at all levels, within and between individuals, communities and cultures. Therefore the important thing is not the conflicts themselves, whether they are good or bad, but how we wish to deal with them.

The roots of the conflict in Burma has not just started with the present militarisation, but has started since the period of colonialisation and entering into Burma's first democratic era. Therefore it lies with attitudes and prejudices

within the society. That's why it is important for the society to look at the root causes of the long conflict and have the courage to carry out the significant social changes needed to rid the country of those deeplying roots.

We cannot ignore any conflict in any country because it effects all of us. If we want to see true peace and justice, not just in Burma but as individuals and within our communities we must all join together for global peace.

"When the sound of compassion
and the flame of love,
and the hand of sacrifice
effuses from each of us,
the enemies called
fear, defeat, over consumption,
chauvinism, love of power,
pride, lack of caring, busyness,
blindness to cries of pain,
and muteness caused by fear,
will fade away
along with the roar of power and
the shout of arrogance.
Then peace will flow
like a mighty and never ending
stream of justice
throughout our world"

by max e

As Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese monk has said,

"The enemy is not a person.
If we kill people,
with whom will we live?
The enemy is not a person,
it lies within each of us."

Raw Shanti Suk

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More than just trying to control the villagers with guns or an iron grip, the Burmese troops use this way to split the community, to create disunity in order to keep the villagers from having a choice to find the way to struggle against injustice together. This is a long-term wound to the community of Burma. But this does not mean that the villagers have given up to the Burmese troops. They know what the injustice is, but the only way they think they have is to follow the Burmese troops for their survival. To empower the villagers, support their struggle and keep their hopes alive we should find ways to work closely with the villagers. Contact with the outside world or with groups supporting the community struggle, will encourage the people to stand together for justice.

For more information on this area BI has a detailed report, "Forced Relocation in Kamoethway". If you would like a copy of this report please contact Burma Issues.

Pah Paw Klo

...continued from p.3

All of this is seen as positive to the Burmese regime. The preoccupation of the west on their human rights record has restricted their moves to gain international recognition, the priority of the neighbouring countries is clear and its not about human rights, its about money. Its the perfect path for Burma's oppressive regime to gain the international and economic support they crave.

Lets not underestimate the strategies of the Burmese military, it has kept them in power for more than forty years always seeming to be one step in front of the rest of us. Lets also not underestimate the need to redirect our energy and pressure towards those countries that have taken a far more accepting and cooperative approach with the Burmese regime. Its a harder task, human rights violations don't play such an important role to these countries, they can't be used as indicators for change. A different approach is perhaps needed to get an effective reaction from these players.

It is possible for the ruling generals to maintain power into the long-term future, never having to succumb power to the wests demands for political change and democracy. While it seems unlikely that Burma will ever recieve support and recognition from the west, at least in the forseeable future, they have turned their efforts elsewhere, the Asian community, and here they are making successful efforts to portray themselves as a formidable, accepted and legitimate governing power.

R Sharples

Endnotes

1. "Sino-Burman Ties: Neighbours agree to deepen cooperation", China Daily, Jan 8, 2003
2. "Burma-Thailand agree to cooperate closely in key areas", The Nation, Feb 10, 2003

news briefs

panicked withdrawls from rangoons banks. A panic to withdraw deposits at Rangoon's 20 private banks escalated this month with the banks deciding to limit withdrawals to 200,000 kyat ($32,200), down from a limit of 500,000 kyat last week. The rush on the banks began with the collapse of some private financial services groups operating outside government financial regulations, which triggered rumors the banks were at risk as well. Ironically, an expression of confidence in the private banks by the central bank governor on Feb. 10 actually exacerbated the run on the banks because many account holders wondered why the central banker was even bothering with such a statement. Khin Nyunt responded with affirmations that there were no problems with the banks in an attempt to stop the widespread panic. Customers have continued to try and withdraw funds while no deposits have been made.

"Rangoon banks hit by rush of withdrawls", Kyodo News Service, Feb 18

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We hope this will make the newsletter more accessible and look forward to your feedback.

hunger strike in dhaka. Burmese refugees in Bangladesh staged a hunger strike in front of the UNHCR office in Dhaka this month. The hunger-strikers were protesting delays and rejections by the Dhaka branch of UNHCR to recognise the Burmese Buddhist refugees who have been living under the most difficult circumstances in south-eastern Bangladesh. UNHCR agreed to talks held between three representatives of the UNHCR and three representatives of the refugees, in presence of the police commissioner, Mahfuzaur Rahman, as a mediator, sources said. Aung Tun Khaing, a mouthpiece of the refugees, put forward three demands to the local chapter of the UNHCR:

- Stoppage of giving lump sum grants to refugees for starting a micro business
- Issue monthly subsistence allowance to those Burmese refugees recognized by the UNHCR
- To recognize the asylum seekers without making any delay

"Burmese refugees' hunger-strike in Dhaka", Narinjara News, Feb 8

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