



Burma Issues

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RICE: INCOME GENERATOR/CULTURAL STAPLE

Is rice to be seen solely as an income generating export commodity or in the light of its cultural importance: a staple food diet, an ingrained traditional form of living, a recipient of ceremonies, blessings and entreaties, and a source of happiness and prosperity.

Nowhere are these two concepts more evidently in conflict than in military ruled Burma where the government exports rice, beyond its means, to generate income for its ruthless military, while its farming population produce the rice, amid traditional forms of farming and with a respect for its integral part to their belief system.

This 7mm grain is more than just a food that fills an empty stomach. Some historical documentation suggest that the domestication of rice began in the upland areas of Shan state.¹ It is often seen as a gift from the Gods and its cultivation is frequently used in traditional and elaborate rituals. Prior to the rice planting season farmers in Burma offer sacrifices to various spirits and Gods to protect their rice crop, from both natural pests as well as Burmese Army pests, and to produce a fruitful and prosperous harvest. At the end of the harvest they perform similar ceremonies as thanks for crops of quality and abundance.

The bride and bridegroom stand together, surrounded by their family and community, dressed in traditional Karen clothing. The villagers hand the best, most pure white rice to the couple, a symbol of a happy, prosperous future for the two of them together, a future with abundance of food. The rice is only the best, the colour a pure white reminiscent of purity and the importance of good crops for the villagers of Burma. Later they return to their home and climb the stairs where more rice is thrown over the couple. Good rice symbolises prosperity in many different forms in Burma. Prosperity for happiness, for suffi-

cient food, to be able to live in safety and perform cultural norms like entertaining family and friends, to perform ceremonies and sacrifices to the spirits and Gods. Good rice very simply symbolises the goodness in ones life.

In March of this year it was reported that 50 people from a village near Taunggyi in Shan state were imprisoned after failing to fulfil their quota of rice to be sold to SPDC authorities. Every household, whether it grew rice or not, was required to sell 54 litres of rice to the government.² Villagers interviewed in Karen state tell of the poor rice harvest they produced this year. Despite this the SPDC demanded they fulfil the same quota as the year before, forcing already



*An IDP child eating a bowl of rice
Free Burma Rangers 2002*

impoverished farmers to buy rice from government agencies to make up their quota and then sell it back to them again. In Rakhine state the local SPDC authorities set up a mobile rice purchase drive which goes from door to door to collect the required quota of rice. Those who fail to produce the set amount are forced to buy rice from the open market to make up the difference, again at a huge loss to themselves. One villager interviewed told how the Burmese military paid 400 kyat for one basket of his rice. In return, when he didn't have enough rice to meet their quota, they charged him 1800 kyat to buy one basket of rice back from them.³ Besides this rampant extortion by the Burmese military, villagers are also subjected to torture, death and imprisonment if they fail to fulfil the set quotas.

The SPDC's forced procurement of rice quotas serves two purposes. One is to fulfil unreasonable export targets, the other to feed the personnel of a rapidly increasing army. In 1999

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P.O. Box 1076
Silom Post Office
Bangkok 10504, Thailand
durham@mozart.inet.co.th
www.burmaissues.org

Burma exported 100,000 tonnes of rice, in 2002 that jumped to 1.5 million tonnes.⁴ To reach these targets the farming population are paying heavy penalties. Increasing numbers of farmers are forced to sell their rice to government officials at drastically reduced costs, they are forced to grow dry season harvests, a time when they traditionally tend to other crops like nuts and let their animals roam the disused fields. These periods give them extra income from alternative crops and allows the soil to recuperate before the next season. In a blatant propaganda exercise the Burmese military conduct special ceremonies at the end of the season when the villagers are forced to hand over their rice quotas. They thank the villagers for cooperating in selling their rice to them, they take videos and photos and give honor to the village headman. They even give the village a medal. It seems like a situation where everyone is happy and cooperative, in reality its a situation full of abuse, threats and force.

One day the troops came into the village and asked me to change their rice for the villagers rice. The quality of their rice was very low and very bad so they wanted to exchange it with us. I returned their rice to them and said that although we are rice farmers we have to buy rice from the troops, the same rice he is now trying to exchange with us. They told me that their rice smells bad and they don't want to eat it. I told them I know your rice smells bad but you still charge us 4,000 kyat for one basket. They continued to complain about their rice and I said, imagine that you have nothing to eat, what will happen to you. Now you have rice, you have something, this is better than nothing. I told them that they had to understand the hardships of the villagers. We only work for them and we have no time to work for ourselves.⁵

The picture of a Burmese army officer whining about his stinky rice appeals to my sense of humour. Unfortunately the situation is far from funny. An increasing number of villagers are giving up on these impossible demands and conditions placed upon them, the threat it creates on their very existence, and are fleeing into Burma's neighbouring countries. They flee the economic struggles that have made their existence unbearable. Others stay and exist in states of starvation. Reports from the 3rd brigade of Karen state say close to 3,000 people are facing starvation



*A farmer ploughing his paddy field with ox
BI 2002*

because of military operations in the area.⁶ A community who once took pride in their work and responsibility for feeding the majority of the population, who historically commanded positions of respect and in return practiced respect back to the Gods of rice, are now expressing the impossibility of their situation by fleeing in droves.

The rice issue in Burma is a perfect example of the ever-widening breach between the Burmese military regime and the people of Burma. One side intent on the potential income generated from this commodity, the other traditionally content to produce enough to feed their families and friends and to express pride in its quality and necessity to their every day lives. In the past, traditional ways of farming have been sufficient to provide rice for families and communities but with the increased pressure to produce high yielding crops to met export targets the Burmese military are creating a starving population. They are also deliberately destroying the cultural importance of rice and rice cultivation techniques by introducing genetically modified species and draining the sustainability of their farming communities.

The Burmese said that we civilians are not educated, we do farming but we cannot produce good rice. So the Burmese army produced a kind of rice and named it Yan Kyuak. This rice originally comes from India. It produces a high yeild, when other rice produces 70-80 baskets, this rice will produce 100 baskets. But it is not delicious. People in our village do not eat this kind of rice, they do not grow it even though it produces high yeild. Even though we do not

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SARS, SADDAM AND THE FORGOTTEN DISEASES

At the start of the Easter Sunday service this month, the Vicar instructed everyone to dip their bread into the wine and not to touch their lips to the cup during communion. Of course this was a direct affect of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic that is spreading around the globe. The most troubling aspect of this is that believers were told they would be denied the cup of Christ if they had no bread to dip into the wine.

The whole SARS disease has created great anxiety in the western world and as a result it has drawn many similarities to the whole "War on Iraq" and "War on Terror". One could compare the SARS virus to Saddam Hussein. Saddam was a dictator who set fear into the secure hearts of the western communities, his regime was a threat to peace and democracy in the eyes of many. SARS is a disease that does not recognise world order and is threatening the health of the western countries. When Iraq was recognised as a threat to the stability of the west, the US chose to do something about it and Iraq was "liberated". But as Iraq falls and the west breathes a sigh of relief other countries continue to suffer from war and dictatorship. Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burma are some of the countries that have and will continue to suffer from war and cruel governments. Saddam is just one of many war mongers of the world and SARS is just one of many diseases in the world that threaten the human race. Just as Saddam made headlines in the media, so does SARS, and the west will work to control its spread. In the mean time other military dictators continue to oppress countries just as diseases continue to affect the people of these same countries. In the same way that the west fails to react to these military leaders, we fail to react to the health issues and needs of these countries. What puts SARS and Saddam at the forefront while these others languish in obscurity?

An example of both the forgotten dictator and the deadly but less noticed diseases is in Burma. Information on the health situation of ethnic minorities was recently collected in Burma's Kayah (Karenni) State. Kayah State is located in the east of Burma along the border with Thailand. Most of the civilian villages have been forced to relocate to a central area by the SPDC. This relocation was done so that the SPDC could keep a close eye on the activities of civilians and prevent their contact with the rebel army KNPP (Karenni National Progressive Party). The information collected revealed that many preventable diseases affect the Karenni civilian population. Among children and youth aged 1 to 16 years, pneumonia, diarrhea, arthritis, malaria and tonsillitis are the most common diseases. Starvation is another

common health condition as there was a food shortage this past year due to low rice crops and the government rice-tax policy. Common colds also hamper the health of youth. Out of 19 villages only 2 had medical centers and both are closed because there are no supplies or medicine in them, most of the communities cannot afford to buy the medicine anyway. The medics do not work because there are no supplies, but these medics are only called medics because they are the people who have administered injections and know what Tylenol does. The medics are not trained and often poorly administer aid or misdiagnose medical conditions making things worse. In some instances the SPDC will send a medic to the villages, but these medics are not trained as well, and the villages must still buy the medicine which they cannot afford. In some reported cases people complained of headaches and were given a pain killer and sent home when they actually had



*A medic attends to a sick child
BI 2002*

malaria. They would rest and the headache would go away and they would return to work only to have the malaria comeback worse. Interviews revealed that NGO's donate supplies and medicine to these areas but the aid will come through the hands of the authorities first and they will administer half of it while selling the rest for profit. The most tragic aspect of these health issues is that they are treatable and preventable diseases and have been for a long time in most parts of the world, but now these diseases are pretty minor in the overall global scale, especially when one considers that Burma is still dealing with cases of leprosy.

So as SARS continues to grip the west with fear, more common and less serious sounding illnesses continue to kill and hamper the repressed people of Burma, and it will remain that way even if a cure for SARS is found. And as Saddam's regime continues to crumble and the west becomes "stable" again, the dictators of smaller poorer nations will continue to repress their citizens, and it will remain this way because these dictators wisely dictate within their own borders and leave the west alone.



Rudy Huffer

RESPONSES FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY WHAT DO ALL SIDES NEED?

The following observations are a result of the recent discussion generated after the "No Place to Go" video screening by Burma Issues in Bangkok. The role of the international community and the responses the NGO community want from them are a constant topic of debate that seems to generate little new discussion. Burma Issues would therefore encourage any return observations, criticisms and dialogue on this topic. We only ask that you make it constructive.

For those working in any type of advocacy and campaigning work the words "international community" are both a lifeline and a headache. The role of the international community in the work of groups who are advocating change or transformation is a necessity. Approaches to the international community for action, pressure, sanctions and awareness, amongst others, is often met with the question, "What exactly do you want us to do?" Is it then the NGO's responsibility to hand the answers to all the questions to them on a silver lined, point-form, grammar checked plate. I suspect this is how we are used to playing the game. And in a way rightly so. The international community rely on individuals and groups who are intimately knowledgeable on certain topics in certain countries to provide them with the reliable and credible information they need.

What happens though when we provide this information and a response fails to materialise. Countless international organisations and funders ask us what we want them to do, they ask for precise and effective actions we want them to undertake, and NGOs reply with reports with very specific recommendations, with a multitude of information: primary and secondary sources, analysis, facts and figures, people's stories, quantitative and qualitative information, photographs and videos. There are eye witness accounts from the exiled Burmese community, the refugee camp population, the illegal migrants on the borders, the IDP population inside, both urban and rural communities, from the educated and the not so educated, all documenting the numerous human rights abuses, war crimes, economic hardships that are direct results of SPDC policy, and blatant mismanagement of the nation.

My response then is what exactly do they need from us that will instigate action from them. It is a question that we perhaps don't ask of the international community enough. What marks a proposal or a request for action that they will be active on apart from those that lay dormant and unnoticed. In Burma the international community has been extremely active in the past year

on the issue of rape, on the other hand the IDP situation continues to remain relatively closed. This is not a debate on which issue is more important, which deserves more attention and action, but very simply the IDP situation will effect a vast number of people in Burma and will directly effect many social and economic structures. But its tangibility is hard to assess, concrete recommendations for action hard to tell and the immediate results of any action almost incomprehensible. Are these the reasons the international community find it harder to deal with, is this why the reports, the information, the pleas for help continue to go unanswered.

Its easy to see why NGOs become disillusioned with the selectiveness of the international responses, why the constant question of "What do you want us to do?" seems to stick in our very throats and obstruct us from moving forward in the kind of collaborative effort that Burma needs if it is to truly become a transformed country of peace and justice. There's a role for so many different groups in Burma: journalists, activists, funders, campaigners, they all know what they can do best and it is not always necessary to wait for someone to tell us what to do next. All these groups have to be responsible for their own creative actions. It seems we're all looking for a definitive answer of what we can do that will bring immediate change to Burma, this is a fine big picture concept to keep in mind, but reality shows that true, effective and sustainable change comes from the people, working one piece at a time, each little action contributing to the bigger picture until the jigsaw puzzle is complete.

I am not sure what the answer to this question is. What can we do? is an important question but its not the definitive question. We can all contribute to the best of our capabilities and shouldn't be hindered by the inability to get a concrete answer to this question. Or is this concept to abstract, to lacking in the precise, point form answers we seem to crave?

THREE COUNTRIES IN ONE DAY

The names and places of this story have been changed for the protection of those involved.

I was about to participate in a video-training workshop when Gee told me we were going to go inside. He gave me the news about a week before we were scheduled to go in. I was a little shocked by it but eager to go. This would be my first time going into Burma. For a long time I had read the stories, history, accounts, atrocities and conflicts, but never had I ventured onto its war torn soil. Okay, maybe this is a little too dramatic because in the end we only barely crossed the border and it was only one day. Our reason for going was to practice operating video cameras and what place is better than the beautiful landscapes of Burma.

One week later we were over-crowded in a 4x4 truck driving to a mystery location. We stopped at a house to pick up supplies and more people. The house seemed to be home to many families, including some people with prosthetics, who appeared to be landmine victims. Everyone was good-natured and relaxed, everyone but me, I was pretty nervous. I am just a big city kid from North America, I had never been anywhere near a war unless you count playing with toy guns in the back woods. I really did not know what to expect, as the details of our trip were not shared openly. Recent tragic events in my life combined with paranoia of knowing too many facts about the civil war in Burma made me a little apprehensive, but still intent on going. The group taking me wanted to spend the night, which made me even more nervous. I had visions of being woken by night raids and explosions. The only concern my friends expressed was if I would be warm enough sleeping in the wild. That was the least of my concerns. They also had fun teasing

me, asking if I had brought my bible and telling me to pack light because I would have to run. These jokes were VERY re-assuring.

As we bounced down a long dirt road to the border, my friend Say taps me on the shoulder from the back seat and says "Today you will set foot in three different countries." He was right, I could not think of anytime I had been in three countries in one day. In fact in a span of a few minutes I would stand in Thailand, the Karen State and Burma.*

Finally we arrived at the border. We had to hike the last kilometer or so. The border was a hut next to some trees. Further along were more, larger huts. They pointed out to me the surrounding landscape that had been littered with land mines. We practiced with the video cameras and people laughed, ate, visited and sang songs. The sun shone and there was nature, it was very quiet and peaceful and a cool wind was blowing. Many times I had to remind myself that I was standing amongst a war zone. There were few signs of it though, only more prosthetics and a child soldier who, thanks to a landmine, was missing part of his foot. We hiked along a small river collecting various plants that we would eat with our supper. When our training was finished we swam in the river. We ate, chewed beetle nut, smoked Cheroot and existed in the moment, undisturbed by what was hidden in and among the land. I became very comfortable after a few hours and was no longer nervous.

As the sun began to lower on the afternoon we decided to return to Thailand and not spend the night. We hiked back to the truck and drove back along the bumpy dirt road. I stood in the back and observed the passing landscape and was completely at ease and satisfied with the day. I was now feeling braver and a part of me was regretting that we were not staying the night. "I can handle it" I thought, as we safely returned to Thailand.

I think my reaction to this trip was normal for a Westerner. Perhaps for me this was a "baby step" that will prepare me for something greater in the future. The conflict and struggles in Burma are very real and present, but for the people I was with, it was the life that they were used to. They stood in their land with pride and watched over it and whether there is only a threat of conflict or no conflict present, they kept the smiles on their faces.

*International politics and the Burmese government do not recognize the Karen State as an independent country.



continued from p.3

produce a high quantity of rice we decided not to grow this rice. Farmers in our village do not use chemical fertilizer, they only use natural fertilizer, because the farmers here realise that the chemical fertilizer will destroy their land. If you use the chemical fertilizer, in the beginning it will produce a high quantity of rice but in a few years it will ruin your land. Chemical fertilizer is only used in big business.⁷

Potentially, a starving population isn't the only concern on Burma's agenda, also at risk is the traditional spiritual beliefs of the people of Burma, the importance and respect that rice has been afforded in this predominantly agrarian society. To Burmese villagers rice is a staple food diet, a revered object for spiritual ceremonies, representative of their traditional beliefs and ways of living, its not an object of export significance. If Burma is intent on meeting its targets for rice exports it needs the infrastructure and economic capabilities to follow this through efficiently. In the present circumstances they are doing what they do best. Enforcing harsh and brutal policies on the general population to fulfill the policies of an incompetent, greedy regime.

NB: On April 23 the SPDC announced the cancellation of their 40 year rice procurement policy in the hope of market reforms and the increased

One side intent on the potential income generated from this commodity, the other traditionally content to produce enough to feed their families and friends and to express pride in its quality and necessity to their every day lives.

production of rice. The SPDC refused to comment on the new policy and didn't elaborate on the implementation of the project. The New Light of Myanmar reported that "there will be no involvement of State organizations in the sale and purchase of rice" and that "all nationals can trade rice in the country freely at the prevailing market price". The SPDC announced this once before, in the early nineties, but quickly reverted back to their old system when rice farmers took them literally and the SPDC found themselves short of rice for both exportation and feeding the military. This new announcement has been attributed to an attempt to stop the flow of disillusioned farmers who are fleeing across the borders and into urban areas because of the impossibility of their situation. Time will show

whether this new policy will end the same as the last one, or whether it can bring much needed reform to Burma's rice problems.

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Tha Lay

(Footnotes)

- 1 *Rice: Then and Now*, R.E. Huke and E.H. Huke, International Rice Research Institute, 1990.
- 2 *Failure to fill rice quota sends farmers to the can*, SHAN, Mar 25
- 3 BI Internal Source
- 4 www.riceweb.org; US Department of Agriculture
- 5 BI Internal Document
- 6 KNU source
- 7 BI Internal Document

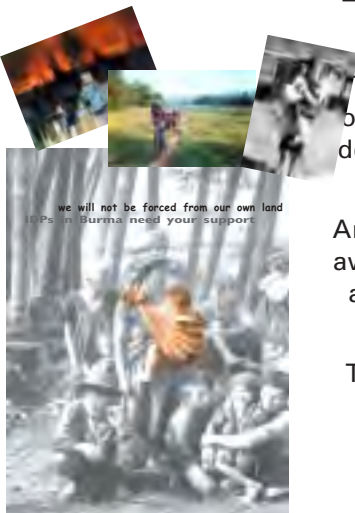
No Place To Go

Burma Issues has just released its latest video on IDPs in Burma, "No Place to Go". The video chronicles the plight of the Internally Displaced People of Burma. Military operations, human rights abuses, mass displacement, food scarcity, crop destruction, denial to health and education and child soldiers are all prominent issues discussed in the video.

Anyone wishing to do their own screening of this video or simply want to broaden their awareness of this issue, can contact Burma Issues for a copy of the video or VCD. We also have promotional material, including petition letters, posters, postcards and IDP information, to go with the video.

The video will also be available for viewing on the WITNESS website from May 2003. www.witness.org

Witness helped Burma Issues produce this video and more information about this organisation can also be found at their website.



news briefs

junta announces end to rice procurement. Burma's military junta announced the scrapping of its 40-year-old paddy procurement policy. "All nationals can trade rice in the country freely at the prevailing market prices," Lieutenant General Soe Win, of the ruling State Peace and Development Council was quoted as saying through an article in the state-run New Light of Myanmar newspaper. "The new rice trading policy has totally removed the government's control of rice... There will be no involvement of state organisations in the sale and purchase of rice," he said. The decision, taken at a high-level junta meeting early in April, signifies a dramatic change in policy in Burma, where agricultural production and trade has been tightly controlled for decades. Under current procurement method the government buys up 10 percent of overall production at officially fixed and heavily deflated prices. The grain is then redistributed to government employees, military personnel and their families as a subsidy, while the rest is stocked for emergencies and for export.

"Burma junta announces end to its rice stranglehold", April 24, AFP

karen rebels sabotage gas pipeline. The Burmese military government accused ethnic Karen rebels of sabotaging a natural gas pipeline, claiming it was the second such incident in about two weeks. The rebels planted explosives that damaged a section of the pipeline near Hnitkayin village, about 105 kilometers south of the Mon State capital of Mawlamyine, said a government news release. The pipeline carries natural gas from offshore fields for use in Burma, and is considered much less important than another line going to Thailand, Burma's main gas buyer. The statement also said the KNU's No. 1 brigade used explosives to damage a section of the pipeline near Warbotaw village, 21 kilometers (13 miles) north-west of Karen state capital, Pa-an. The KNU announced on Saturday that it was responsible for a series of attacks on a gas pipeline in Burma beginning in February. The KNU said in a statement released on Saturday that they chose the pipeline because it was generating cash reserves to purchase military hardware that was being used against the Karen.

"Burma's government says ethnic Karen rebels damaged gas pipeline", April 22, AP

protestor in british embassy. A Burma man took refuge inside the British Embassy after being chased by policemen while staging a political protest, officials and sources said. He was still in the embassy eight hours after the incident, and government officials were negotiating with British diplomats to get him out, presumably to arrest him, sources said. They also said diplomats were apparently seeking assurances from authorities about the protestor's well being. A government statement said security personnel arrested the man in the monk's robes while the other ran into the embassy compound. The statement said "according to diplomats having the man inside the embassy could hurt the security," but did not explain why the embassy has not given him up yet. British Embassy staff contacted by telephone said they have been instructed by their superiors not to speak to anyone about the incident. The British ambassador was not available for comment.

"Burma man takes refuge in british embassy", April 4, AP

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PO BOX 1076
SILOM POST OFFICE
BANGKOK 10504
THAILAND**

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