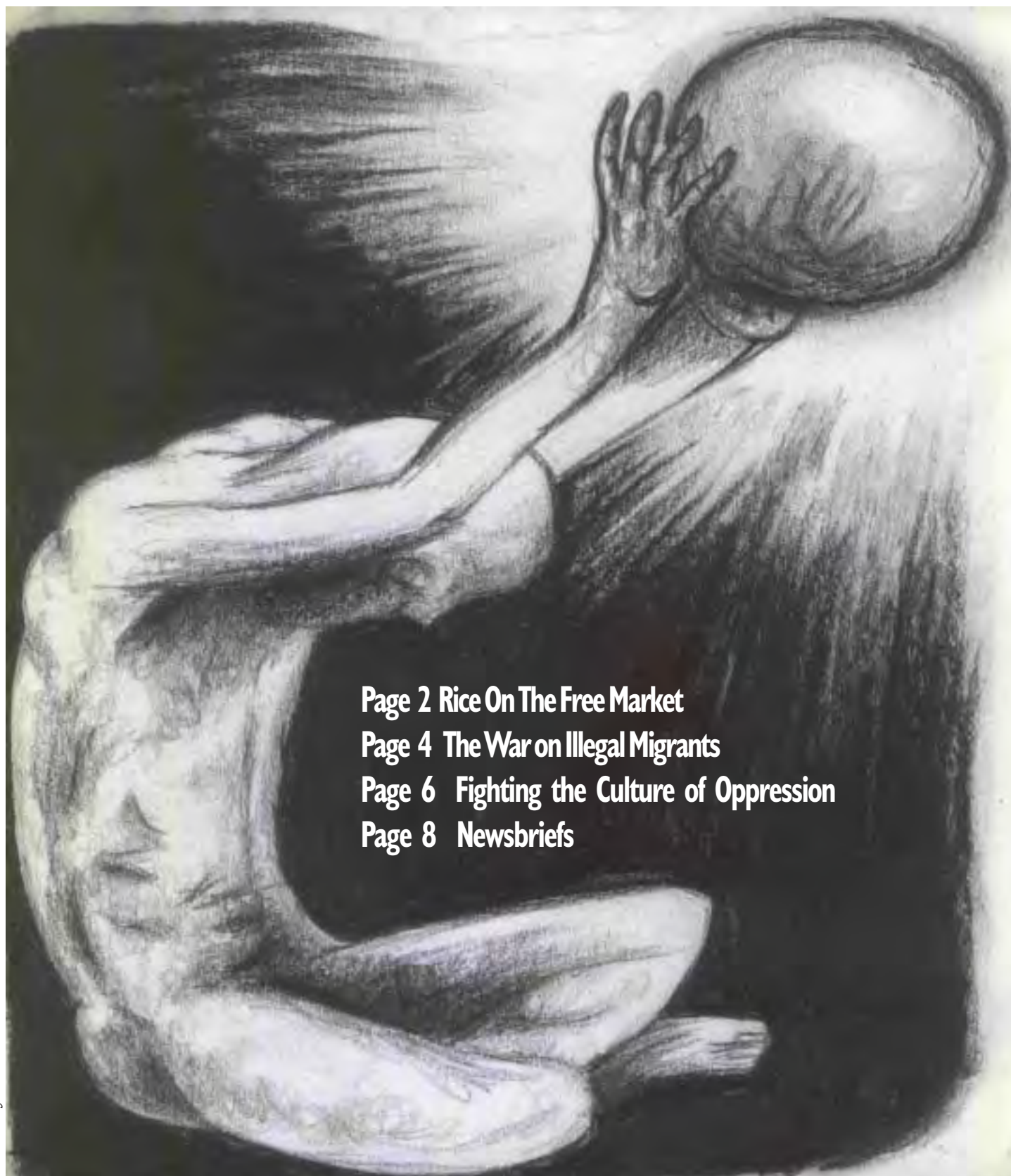




Burma Issues

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Picture by N Cheesman

RICE ON THE FREE MARKET

In April the SPDC announced the cancellation of their forced rice procurement policy and a new rice trading policy that would ensure "...free trade of the crop in the interest of the entire peasantry and helping develop the market-orientated economy." In a country where 75% of the population are engaged in agriculture, 6.5 million hectares of land is used for rice farming and 55% of the country's GDP is accounted for through the Agriculture sector,¹ the policies governing rice trade is quite important. For the past forty years that policy has involved the Burmese military forcing farmers to sell rice at below market prices and fulfilling set quotas for which the farmers often received no compensation. The Burmese military were able to feed their ever-expanding army and through export revenue maintain and expand that same army. In the meantime the majority of Burma's population faced increasing food scarcity, starvation and over-inflated prices for basic necessities. These issues have both contributed and been effected by Burma's deteriorating economic system.

In Burma there are many reasons why merely cancelling the rice procurement policy will not improve the free market economy and trade of rice. Cancelling a draconian and brutal policy does not address other contributing factors that are seriously depleted and mismanaged within Burma's economic structure. In typical Burmese military fashion these other considerations are merely deleted from the equation as they continue to manage the country by implementing policies that are independent of associated factors. I would like to put forward six factors that I think will influence the successful implementation of this policy:

1. Export targets are unreasonable and unattainable. In the first eight months of 2002 the SPDC stated their rice exports had reached 742,000 tons, a 114.19% increase on the previous year. According to US Department of Agriculture statistics which rely on Burmese government figures, rice exports increased from 57,000 in 1999 to 1.5 million in 2002.² The

SPDC have steadily increased export targets despite factors inside the country that would influence the ability to reach those targets. While these targets remain at unreasonably high levels rice farmers will be faced with coercion, force and increasing poverty as the Burmese military demand the targets be met.

2. The use of traditional farming methods. The majority of Burma's rice farmers operate small plots that aren't conducive to large scale production. They continue to use traditional farming methods that mean harvesting is usually done by hand and in many cases oxen and ploughs are still used for cultivation. The Burmese military have forced farmers to plant summer rice crops which will have serious effects on the sustainability of Burma's soils. They have even tried to introduce genetically modified rice grains that without any educational explanation can be a foreign concept to traditional farmers. The large scale cultivation needed to meet Burma's export targets needs a complimentary and often complex infrastructure system to back it up. Burma's traditional rice farming methods would find it hard to cope with this kind of production.

3. The effect natural elements can have on crop production. This variable, while mostly impossible to predict must be taken into account. Currently the Burmese military show no recognition of the effects this phenomena can have on farmers crop production. Last year in Karenni state, serious flooding and to a lesser extent high seed prices, meant there was only a 20-25% rice production rate. These farmers could not even feed their families with such a low production rate, let alone fulfill the government imposed rice quota. At the other extreme drought-like conditions also effected harvest levels. Despite these factors that are out of farmers control, the Burmese military continue to force farmers to fulfill unrealistic rice quotas. Even a free and open market economy can not dictate the weather.

4. The civil war. Military operations, especially in Burma's rural areas, seriously effect farmers abilities to tend their paddy fields. The military will often burn and destroy paddy fields and rice storage barns. Forced relocation of entire villagers to forced relocation camps is rampant throughout the ethnic areas. Once in these forced relocation camps villagers are either denied access to return to their farms or are only allowed to tend to their farms on a limited basis which means nature and wild ani-

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mals will often destroy their crops. Until the Burmese military cease targeting the civilian and mostly farming population in the ethnic areas and reach some kind of cease-fire with the ethnic armed opposition groups, this issue will continue to effect rice farmers abilities to actually produce their crop.

5. The lack of infrastructure to back up an open market trading. Things as simple as an adequate road and transport system for the movement of rice would be seriously stretched in Burma. To cultivate large-scale levels of rice suitable for export would also require infrastructure that would supply fertilizier systems, irrigation and modern drying and storing facilities. Having the rice is one point but cultivating, milling and exporting it are also important links in the chain. Due to years of bad governance Burma's infrastructure can simply not cope with this kind of production.

6. The role of the black market and hyperinflation. Burma's reliance on the black market is not going to disappear easily. Over many years discrepancies between state run shop prices and the black market prices have had tremendous effects on peoples ability to survive. The costs of even basic necessities are now highly inflated and the average person in Burma struggles to afford even a pyi (2kgs) of rice. Declines in productivity and hoarding of goods can be common scenarios on the free market as people become increasingly used to ensuring their survival within a constantly shifting economy. The SPDC will often lay the blame for the faltering economy on destructive elements in control of inflation on the black market, diverting attention away from their own mismanagement of Burma's economic system. There can be no doubt though that this variable market system will have a huge impact on the ability to trade rice on a free market.

So what is the real reason for announcing this new policy after forty years? An obvious reason is the gross mismanagement of the country that the Burmese generals consistently uphold. Burma's economy is racked with incompetence, ignorance and a lack of basic understanding for effective economic practices. These shortfalls have contributed to Burma's Least Developed Country Status, hyperinflation of basic commodity prices, the depletion of basic services like health and education and the flourishing black market. The economy needs reform, and for the benefit of their standing among both the inter-

national community and an increasingly unrestful domestic population, the SPDC need to be seen to be doing something.

The announcement could be seen as giving the SPDC some breathing space from an international community that is increasingly vocal about the stagnation of dialogue and lack of genuine interest in democratic change. It could be an attempt to show some liberalisation by openly encouraging a free open-market economy. The SPDC periodically offer small concessions of genuine interest in reform when the international community some pressure. Unfortunately



those concessions are usually brief and ill-informed decisions that have no real benefit for the population or the future stability of the country. They are merely words that are never accompanied by actions that would back up such a statement with effective and sustainable change.

The need to get rid of Burma's forced rice procurement policy is not in doubt. Farmers should be allowed to trade their rice crops freely and enjoy the benefits of this. To make this successful though many other economic discrepancies will need to be addressed as well. Reform of Burma's economy is long over-due and its deficiencies are increasingly being felt by the general population. Realistically, this reform is not going to come while the current military regime remain in power and continue to implement ill-informed, and incompetent, economic policies.

Endnotes

1. www.riceweb.org
2. The Irrawaddy, Nov 2002

THE WAR ON ILLEGAL MIGRANTS

The first weekend of June saw a flurry of action in Mae Sot regarding Burmese migrant workers. The Thai government announced their new 'War against Illegal Migrants', insisting they will crackdown not only on illegal migrant workers, but also their employers and those helping them with housing or work. This national campaign seems to have started in Mae Sot where the government announcements follow weeks of violence and fear.

Last week seven Burmese migrant workers were found killed near Huay Kalo in Tak Province.

They had been missing for more than a week when they were found burned to death on a pyre of tyres on May 14. A kamnan from Mae Pa District was arrested on Saturday 31st of May for his involvement in the murder of the six Burmese migrant workers. In the last week of May another Burmese migrant worker was found killed, according to Thai authorities, by a teenage gang who apparently roam the streets at night. These gangs go looking for Burmese people who they then rob and beat up. There are many migrant workers from Burma living in Mae Sot and the Burmese have

More than 8,000 Burmese migrants that have already been deported, according to Mae Sot immigration officials, since the Thai-Burma border re-opened in October 2002. Up until now, the often harsh Thai policy has not prevented Burmese from fleeing the violations of human rights in their country.

become increasingly cautious about going out at night. This situation has been exacerbated by these latest government announcements.

On the 28th of May Pol Lt-Gen Charnwut from the national Thai Immigration Police announced that every Thai national helping illegal Burmese migrants would face punishment. In the last week of May, Deputy Prime Minister Korn Dabbaransi also announced harsh punishment for employers of illegal migrant workers, during his visit to the Thai-Burmese border near Mae Sot. "If we find migrant workers without permits, we will penalise the employers. If there is no one to provide shelter or employ them they will not come back to Thailand again," Dabbaransi said. The crackdown will start in Mae Sot, Samut Sakhon and Ranong. From June, anyone arrested for immigration violations

in Mae Sot will have their fingerprints taken and workers whose prints have previously been recorded will face harsher penalties.

CRACKDOWNS

In April the Thai government announced their new 'War on Illegal Migrants' although it is hardly a new war. For years the Thai authorities have tried to solve this problem and with little debatable success so far. Many Burmese migrant workers keep crossing the border daily. This, despite the more than 8,000 Burmese migrants that have already been deported, according to Mae Sot immigration officials, since the Thai-Burma border re-opened in October 2002. Up until now, the often harsh Thai policy has not prevented Burmese from fleeing the violations of human rights in their country.

According to the latest Government figures there is 1.5 to 2 million illegal migrants in Thailand. From these numbers 1.1 million are from Burma and most of them stay in the border area, about 60,000 in Mae Sot alone. Many factories along the border work with illegal migrant workers as they are cheap workers and they often take jobs that Thais don't want. Migrant workers often work for as little as 60 baht per day and endure 12-15 hour days. While the Thai authorities spent most of 2001 and 2002 trying to implement a registration system for migrant workers, the outcome was of little benefit to anyone. Employers would often keep the employees work permits making them vulnerable to police detection on the streets and so dependent on their employers that they cannot demand to be treated fairly. Recent estimates place 500,000 migrant workers who are still unregistered, mostly due to the high costs involved and the little seeable benefit that being registered has given migrant workers.

CO-OPERATION

The risk of deportation seems even more evident after close co-operation between the Thai and Burmese governments over migrant workers, was established last year. After extensive talks in Phuket, Burma and Thailand agreed in February last year to set up a holding center in Myawaddy for the, as they called it, 'quick and effective repatriation' of Burmese illegal workers. About 250 to 300 Burmese have been sent to this deportation centre since it opened.

According to the Phuket agreement Burmese illegal migrants can only be sent to the detention center when their names and addresses are sent to Burma via the Burmese embassy in Thailand. In May this year this agreement changed again, as Thailand convinced Burma to accept all Burmese illegal workers, regardless of their ethnicity or papers. This will make it even easier for Thailand to deport the migrant workers. According to Burmese law people who cross the border illegally can be sentenced from 6 months to 5 years imprisonment. In June both countries plan to discuss the issue of deportation again.

In the last talks in May between Foreign Minister Surakiart and Burma's General Khin Nyunt, Thailand emphasized economic cooperation as a way to solve the migrant problem. But the migrant workers don't come to Thailand to just earn money. They cross the border because they want to survive. They flee from war, torture, forced labour and a life in fear. Due to forced relocation and other human rights abuses they cannot support themselves or their children.

The continuing flow of refugees and migrant workers will only stop when it is possible for them to survive in Burma with a suitable level of security. The Thai government, so far, has hardly urged Burma to stop violating human rights. Instead the Thai government prefers to focus on the migrants crossing the border and the economic situation in Burma. By focusing on this issue they are failing to address the fundamental problems that are causing refugees and migrant workers to flee across Burma's borders to begin with. Even though they are facing a life of uncertainty and fear in Thailand, it is preferable to the harsh reality of their existence in Burma.

the factory owners the Burmese migrants are cheap labourers. They are an attractive labour force for factory owners as their fear of being sent back to Burma is often an effective silence to their criticisms and demands for fair treatment. Most factory owners are said to be in close contact with local police and with gangs who sort any problems with their migrant workers out.

While the Thai government continues their battle against Burmese migrant workers in Thailand by discussing their deportation, the Burmese refugees will continue to cross the border. As long as the situation in Burma shows little sign of improvement, the Burmese migrant workers will come to Thailand to survive. The Thai government should be urging Burma to stop human rights violations. In the meantime they need to enforce factories adherence to Thai labour



*Burmese migrant workers captured in Ranong
BI 1999*

VULNERABILITY

In April this year a group of 26 migrant workers were the first to start a court case against their employer, the owner of the Nut Knitting Partnership factory, who had not paid their salaries for over 3 months. The group of migrant workers decided to take their case to court. Unfortunately they will never hear the verdict as after talks with their representatives the group of migrant workers was deported to Myawaddy in Burma on the 21st of April.

Thai laws should protect legal migrant workers, but the daily practice is very different. For

laws. That might be one war the Thai government cannot win.

Perhaps the most prominent issue that has arisen in the past few weeks is the violent treatment the Burmese migrant workers are receiving in Thailand. It's not a new idea, last year 17 Burmese migrant workers were found floating in a stream in Mae Lamao. A domestic worker was beaten severely and burnt by her employer, she later died in hospital and last month a Burmese factory worker was electrocuted and had both his hands amputated due to faulty electrical wiring in the factory. No-one has been brought

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FIGHTING THE CULTURE OF OPPRESSION

Oppression, has existed at some point, in the life of almost every individual. The schoolyard bully is an oppressor, the wife-beater is an oppressor, the domineering and demanding boss can be an oppressor, your father, teachers and friends can all be oppressors, the military regime in Burma is definitely an oppressor. Oppression is all about power. It is someone in the position of power enforcing a harsh and cruel doctrine onto someone who is powerless. It is refusing to acknowledge a persons right to choose to govern their own lives. The oppressor believes he has the right to subject another human being to a position of inferiority. It is usually done with force and can be both mental and physical.

The key to fighting the doctrine of oppression is realising the oppressor cannot exist in this equation on their own. The oppressed, sometimes unknowingly, can also contribute to their state of oppression. In fact they are an integral part of the oppression structure, for without their obedience the oppressors would never have the ability to maintain this system of oppression.

The contribution to this system by the oppressed themselves is sometimes a hard concept to grasp. This awareness is necessary though if they are to create alternative options for transforming the system. In *Pedagogy of the*

Oppressed, Paulo Freire talks in depth about the oppressed, who in their need for survival, contribute significantly to the continuation of their own oppression. He calls it the "culture of oppression", traits that are predominant in the oppressed that leads to a passiveness and a feeling of

victimisation. They feel powerless to change the existing structures and therefore accept their position as the oppressed.

Some of these traits include disillusionment with the existing structure, but also in the ability to bring change; fear of the oppressor, in Burma this is evident in the violent and degrading actions the military use in carrying out their oppression; hopelessness and a lack of confidence in their own abilities, a feeling that they can't possibly effect any change against such a strong adversary and therefore acceptance of their current situation; self-interest, part of the patron-client system in Burma is the fear of giving up those benefits which have been gained, be it monetary, prestige or higher standards of living; fear of physical violence and the use of punishment/reprisals to deter disobedience in others.

All these traits are symptoms of the oppressed and some of the reasons that the few can, and do, control the many.

The onus for transforming the system of oppression lies with the oppressed. The oppressor will not change a system that gives him power, security and riches. Simone de Beauvoir once wrote, "The oppressors interest lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not in changing the situation that oppresses them." It is therefore left up to the oppressed to break down the structures of this system, to enforce the changes that are needed to dispel this culture of oppression. It is up to the oppressed to fight for their freedom from oppression.

The ways to fight this state of oppression include first, a realisation of the existence of this oppressive structure, followed by gaining the confidence to realise you can bring change to this existing structure. This is not merely fixing the problem, as this is a temporary solution, but transforming the system.

Mahatma Ghandi suggests there are three points that need to be addressed if the oppressed are to change patterns of obedience and cooperation.

1. Psychological change from passive submission to self-respect and courage
2. Recognition by the oppressed that their assistance contributes to making the regime of oppression possible
3. Building a determination to withdraw cooperation and obedience



Picture by N Cheesman

Examples of this are evident in Burma today. Ethnic groups have been using violence in their attempts to maintain their identities and rights for hundreds of years. To date it is a path that has yielded few sustainable or beneficial results. Groups and individuals are trying some different approaches. Instead of fighting these negative institutions with arms and violence they are creating new and alternative solutions to break down their oppression.

Participating in the system of armed violence to try and achieve your goals is the easy option. It is a method already in existence and to participate in it requires little forethought. On the other hand choosing to transform a system is hard work, it requires original thought and a lot of sacrifice but perhaps in the long run it is the path that can produce the most positive and sustainable results. It is a path too few choose to follow. Burma Issues produces a magazine called the New Eye, a publication that collects true stories from the people of Burma who are fighting existing structures of oppression through alternative and peaceful means. One such story involved a village in the Irrawaddy Delta. With the uncertainty that followed the 1988 democracy uprising, a majority of the participants being students, the military regime in their attempt to squash further dissent shut down all the schools in the country. As a result, this particular village found most of their school age students wandering around with little to do. One of the young villagers suggested that even though the school was shut there was nothing stopping them from teaching the children in their own homes. While the government can try and oppress them by refusing the people their rights to education, the village created an alternative, and peaceful, solution to the problem; we can teach them ourselves. This particular story ends with a very poignant line, "If we unite, we're powerful".¹

In a country where any sort of dissent to the regime's policies is dealt with in harsh and violent terms, the voice of opposition produces actions that are often seen as small, simple and useless to the ultimate outcome. It is a sign nevertheless that the people can, and are, taking positive steps towards a peaceful system of dissent to their situation of oppression. In a Canadian newspaper Myint Shwe wrote, "As in any oppressed country, irony and humour are quickly transformed into invisible weapons of the people".² An example of which was the military's reaction to a piece of graffiti on the walls of the Shwedagon pagoda. The graffiti

read, "Whoever divides us; we remain united, fast", the slogan of the Burma army, to which someone had added, "We will split ourselves when the time comes". For this little contribution of dissent the military cordoned off the area in search of the culprit, taking into custody and subjecting to harsh questioning anyone who looked suspicious.

The victory often lies in the reaction of the military. In many cases they show themselves to be insecure in their practices and therefore open to attack. A group that has to defend themselves in such an extraordinarily exaggerated way is really only highlighting their weakness. Those that have a strong belief in their activities and their ideologies would not feel the need to defend themselves so brutally and openly. These are the often hard to find signs that peaceful dissent to oppressive regimes can bring results; they are long-term, just, and the corner-stones for building an alternative system free of oppression.



Tha Lay

Recommended further reading:

- *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1972)
- *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: Power and Struggle* by Gene Sharp (1984)
- Center for Justpeace in Asia, www.daga.dus.org/justpeace

(Endnotes)

- 1 *The New Eye*, Burma Issues, 1997
- 2 *Burma: The Power of Passive Resistance*, by Myint Shwe, University of Toronto Newspaper, November 1994

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to justice for these crimes. Migrant workers are forced to work long hours, often for no pay or below standard wages. They receive little in the way of benefits and healthcare and they are constantly faced with the threat of being found and deported. Yet the Thai companies need these workers. They contribute about 350 million US Dollars per year to the Thai economy, in jobs Thai would rather not do. And these Thai employers are allowed to treat them with little accountability for their actions. The recent spate of violence towards Burmese migrant workers is something Thai society needs to take a reflective look at. Regardless of whom these people are or where they come from, the nature of this violence and the lack of accountability for those who are committing such heinous crimes must be addressed.



Taw Tra

news briefs

salai Tun Than released. Burma's military government released 21 prisoners, including prominent academic Salai Tun Than and 12 members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) this month. The junta released a statement saying they had commuted the sentences and released 21 prisoners, taking into consideration health and humanitarian concerns. The batch of prisoners included the highly respected retired professor Salai Tun Than, a 74-year-old ethnic Chin who staged a solo pro-democracy protest in Rangoon in November 2001. "The release of Dr. Salai Tun Than came at the request of many friends who were concerned about his age and state of mind," the statement said.

aung san suu kyι detained. NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyι was detained into what the SPDC called "protective custody" after violent clashes between USDA members and NLD supporters. Four people were reported killed in the clashes although many reports suggested the number could be higher. Aung San Suu Kyι and other leading NLD leaders as well as many youth members were detained and reportedly transferred back to

Rangoon where they continue to be detained. Many supporters who had been accompanying her were still missing from their homes. The detention was seen as a serious set-back for the stagnated reconciliation talks between the NLD and the SPDC. Suu Kyι had been allowed relatively free travelling space although most of her trips have been encumbered by harassment from SPDC-backed groups.

six migrant workers killed. Police in Mae Sot, Thailand found six dead bodies last week, believed to be migrant workers from Burma. Relatives of the six workers, missing for more than a week, said the men had last been seen in the custody of police, who had beaten them. In a letter to the National Human Rights Commission the relatives stated, "The missing persons were last seen in the custody of uniformed Thai police. They further added, "Official complicity in this case, combined with the knowledge that local authorities in Mae Sot rarely, if ever, protect Burmese migrant workers, mean that the only possibility for recourse on our behalf is through national organisations such as the National Human Rights Commission.". Thai authorities

arrested Woon Tarmingkum, head of Mae Pa village, in connection with the deaths which were believed to be a result of the six refusing to pay money to the villages security guards. More than 1 million migrant workers from Burma work in Thailand.

bomb blasts in Tachilek. Four Burma nationals were killed on May 21 in separate blasts in a town near the border with Thailand.. The four bomb attacks in the Shan state town of Tachilek, opposite Thailand's Mae Sai, followed a visit to the area by top Burma and Thai officials two days before hand. Burmese Government spokesman Colonel Hla Min said in a statement. "The incidents are under investigation and the details will be given out later when we have more information." He added that "all fingers are pointing towards SURA" (Shan United Revolutionary Army), an ethnic rebel force also known as the Shan State Army (SSA) which is fighting against Rangoon rule. SSA leader Yord Serk later denied any involvement in the blasts, which a Thai official said took place at a police station, petrol station, a statue of a past Burma king and a power plant.

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