Burma Issues

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Turning the Invisible, Visible

The following are observations based on a recent visit to Burma.

In Burma's cities and towns the people materialise out of nowhere. They greet you with "hello's" and "where you come from?" Broken english and standard lines. They are neutral approach tactics that often underly a very specific wish to speak. They are just one aspect of Burma's often cloaked voices of dissent and it often comes at a price.

Looking over your shoulder

Many have been imprisoned for their outspokeness and live with Big Brother appearing over their shoulder. They stare at passer-bys suspiciously, darting eyes searching for the SPDC informer that can make their lives miserable. They have perfected the transition from "tourist speak" to "political speak" whenever such an undesirable wanders by or blatantly stops to listen to the english conversation with a foreigner. There is an intensity in their need to let you know what is REALLY happening in Burma. They speak of fabricated stories and an endless feedmill of lies. They speak of Aung San Suu Kyi's recent arrest as "The event" or the "May 30 incident". They explain it with words like "assassination attempt" and a premeditated attack on democracy. They talk of wanting to let the world know the real story, that hundreds were killed in the attack, not the government reported four. They receive this news from foreign broadcasted news services like the BBC and Radio Free Asia, the international community they so desparately want to inform is in fact informing them. No news of this event is reported in the Burmese media at the time. They talk of economic hardships, wages that can't possibly support themselves or their families, electricity shortages and the need for generators if you want any kind of consistent electricity. (A generator costs US$10,000-$30,000, putting it way outside the affordability range of the average Burmese person and making this basic service one reserved for the rich). They talk of the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, and the slow erosion of Burma's middle class. The upper class, made up of military personnel and businessmen, and the ever increasing poor class as more people are battered down to a life of poverty. The injustices and hardships are ever foremost in their stories, they're frustration and anger almost hidden by the matter-of-fact way they tell their stories.

Postcards

He has a name but I don't know it. He follows me for three blocks. He should be in school, instead he's trying to sell me some dusty old postcards for a measley 1000 kyat. He buys them

The People's Desire or the Burmese militaries desire?
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from the shop for 700 kyat, of the rest 200 kyat will be given to his school so that he can attend an unreliable and sub-standard education system, and the remaining 100 kyat goes to support his mother and his little sister. He can't be more than ten and wears the remnants of thanaka on his cheeks. He tells me he thinks its beautiful and that both boys and girls can wear it, he calls it Myanmar's Number 1. If I buy the postcards from him he can go home for the day and then attend school the next. He is one of Burma's many invisible children who are either denied an education or struggle to get an inferior one. They are Burma's future and they are largely illiterate, forced to carve out a meagre existence on the streets, forced their by a military regime that doesn't seem to care.

Who's visible, who's not

In Mandalay they say as much as seventy percent of the population is Chinese. It seems every second shopfront provides evidence of this. Rich Chinese businessmen drive around in jeeps and Toyotas, ugly but I guess it broadcasts their mod-

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ern status (it also has the benefit of being able to negotiate Burma's pot-hole lined freeways?). Their western style of dress puts them apart from the longyi wearing Burmese. They are rich and they are willing to spend in Burma, thus making them a welcome addition to Burma's eroded economy. The door has remained open to those from Burma's greatest investor and assistor. The Chinese are highly visible, especially in Mandalay, and the people know it, causing them to express concern over possible annexation to China. The idea seems a little fantastic but the steady and subtle envelopment of Mandalay warrants serious speculation of the motives.

Another highly visible population are the Indians. Indian restaurants, Indian cornerstores and Indian businesses are scattered across Rangoon. So where are Burma's ethnic groups, where are the Karen, the Chin, the Mon? One thing I am never permitted to see or hear about, as a tourist, is reference to Burma's ethnic problems. If you're lucky you'll find their traditional products in tribal tourist shops. The Shan seem to be more visible in the restaurant industry but generally speaking, in Burma's central cities and towns there seems to be no acknowledgement, or at least no-one talking about, the ethnic groups and their problems.

The invisibility of the ethnic issue has been one of the Burmese militaries great successes. It's invisible to tourists who mostly walk the government determined paths of official sites, it seems invisible to the general urban population even. An equally successful campaign has been the divisiveness of Burma's many groups. City and rural, democracy and the ethnic issues, political and armed conflict, struggling to survive in an economic sense and struggling to survive in a physical sense, educated and non-educated.

Division is the ultimate weapon for a military intent on eradicating unity and has permeated almost every level of society, subtly cloaking Burma's way of life. You dangle a little bit to one group, just enough so that they aren't willing to give up what little they have, and you brutally oppress the other. The art of dangling highlights the insecurities of human nature but you can't begrudge a man who only wants the best for his family. More important is the Burmese government machinery that encourages the poor to either fight or perhaps even more devastating, ignore the plight of the very poor. It is a masterful concept: the oppressed will merely fight the wretchedly oppressed and wipe each other out, less energy wasted by the Burmese military and their mission accomplished.

One of the many private-owned generators that line Rangoon's streets
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Perseverance does triumph

In 1964 a Shan man lost his tractor to Ne Win and his military regime. A shiny, red, entirely capable and necessary beast, consumed like so much else under the brutal blanketing of Ne Win's military. For the next thirty years the Shan man wrote, asking permission for HIS tractor to be returned. The letters went unanswered, the tractor rotted away in some yard where the military failed to see it's usefulness and importance. Finally, in 1994 the man found himself in a position where he could ask something of the Burmese military. "I want nothing from you," he said. "But you could return my tractor you stole 30 years ago." Three months later he recieved a call telling him to come and pick the tractor up. It was a rusty bucket of loose screws and decayed parts. 30 years of letter writing showed he was not a man who easily gave up. He began repairing it, promising himself it would be finished before the 30 years it had taken for it to be returned. It took him just four years. You see, perseverance does triumph!

Talking and doing

"Why do you want the US to come and get rid of the Burmese generals I asked one man". He said it was because the military cuts off their ability to do anything themselves. They had suffered years of oppression that allowed the military to maintain a tight control over them. They can't possibly do this themselves, it will have to come from foreign intervention. I wanted to tell the man of the english language students who defied that oppression by talking with me, I wanted to tell him of the man who defied four imprisonments and continual harrassment to practice his political views, I wanted to tell him of the man who defied a 7 year prison sentence

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The Lives of the People
Inside Karenni State: Part 2

This is the final part to a series documenting the lives of the villagers in Central Karenni State. This week Burma Issues looks at the security of livelihood and living with military operations in these areas.

When the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) implemented its four-cuts policy in 1996, almost every village was forced to relocate. Homes were burnt down and crops were destroyed. The villagers were forced to move to relocation sites demarcated by the SPDC. While they were staying in the relocation sites they received no aid from the SPDC. They survived by sneaking out and stealing food or using the little rice-paddy they may have brought with them. Some families had to sell their livestock to buy food. Many had nothing left to sell and they also had no place to plant or garden and remained unemployed. The people found it very difficult to make ends meet. It is clear that after the SPDC implemented the four-cuts policy, the livelihood, health and education of the people deteriorated dramatically.

In 1996 many villages east of the Pon River were relocated. This posed many difficulties for the villagers ability to survive as they were not provided with food whilst at the relocation site and many villagers had to sell their belongings and livestock in order to buy food.

In 1998-1999, while some villagers continued staying at the relocation sites, others returned to their old villages and resettled without the formal permission of the SPDC regional command. They just asked the SPDC authorities based in their township. The SPDC authorities gave permission to return as long as there was no fighting around their village. They were also not allowed to contact the Karenni rebel groups. They warned the villagers that if any fighting took place they would come back and burn down the village and the villagers would have to go back to the relocation sites.

Security of Livelihood

People in this area have been facing a rice shortage for several years. This is the result of the government agricultural development program that has caused people to have no time to work for their own subsistence activities. "Compared to ten years ago, production of rice and other crops today is decreasing dramatically and has severely affected our daily lives," said a farmer north of the Htoo Chaw River. Government imposed rice quotas also contribute to the reduction of rice available to farmers. When food runs short, some villagers have had to pawn or sell their land and belongings.

Limited options for survival force people to be resourceful. Many villagers migrate to other towns and the Burma-China border in the hope of getting a job. Kayan long neck ladies are also used to generate income on the Thai-Burma border.

In 1996 many villages east of the Pon River were relocated. This posed many difficulties for the villagers ability to survive as they were not provided with food whilst at the relocation site and many villagers had to sell their belongings and livestock in order to buy food. As a result when some of these villagers returned to their homes in 1998-99 they had to begin to rebuild from scratch.

Although the area is covered with fertile soil and has a good water source, which makes it suitable to grow paddy and sesame, villagers do not take advantage as the necessary resources and tools to transform the wild land into tillable farm land aren't available. Villagers are chiefly dependent on the little income they earn from selling fish, vegetables, betel nut and betel leaves. Their lives are in a constant state of deprivation and uncertainty.

Activities of SPDC troops

Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #337, #429 and #430 at the Baw La Keh base leave their base once a month for operations. LIB #427 at the artillery base of Dee Maw Hsoe, also leave for military operations once a month. LIB #428 and #531 and KNPLF troops operate on the western side of the car way. Whenever these troops hear of Karenni force movement, they go out and comb the area for Karenni soldiers. More regularly, they would go out in the first or last week of every month to look for Karenni forces and their hiding places.

In addition to this, there seems to be some differences in their activities recently. Previously, the Burmese military would enter a village and call for a meeting with the village chief, the village secretary and all ward leaders. Then they would question these people on Karenni force movements, asking them to guide their troops to their bases. They would also demand food from the people without paying or simply steal

it. Now, however, when they enter a village, they will set up a temporary clinic and ask the people to see their medics for treatment and even medicines.

Whenever they go on their operations, they carry enough rations for a week. Sometimes they finish their rations early and demand rice from the villages. Villagers who are suspected of supporting or contacting Karenni forces are arrested and put in detention and tortured. Their chickens and pigs may be confiscated without compensation. The cease-fire agreement that the Karenni National Defence Army (KNDA) and Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) have with the SPDC means that their troops usually go along with the SPDC troops for their operations.

In 2002, KNPLF troops called a meeting with some village chiefs and secretaries. During the meeting, the KNPLF appealed to the people to pressure the KNPP forces, either individually or as a group, to join with KNPLF and exchange arms for peace. After the meeting, they distributed peace pamphlets.

A villager displaced by military operations
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SPDC troops send spies to remote villages to investigate the movements of Karenni forces. They want to know how the Karenni forces get and transport their food. An SPDC spy who was captured by Karenni forces told how he had tried running away from his unit before. He was re-captured and told that if he did not re-join the army he would be put in jail. Subsequently they decided to use him as a spy and sent him to find out more about the Karenni forces. He told of SPDC detectives who were pretending to be cattle traders and another spy who was pretending to be a monk but was really sent to investigate whether another monk was supporting and contacting Karenni forces.

Living with Karenni troops

Some villagers were also critical of the role of Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) troops. Many work hard with love, respect, understanding and trust for each other and the villagers. However, some abuse their power. In some cases villages expressed fear of KNPP soldiers and felt that the lives and wishes of the village people weren't being respected. They were also worried that the soldiers would be a security risk and could have a negative impact on some of the families' work. As one villager put it, *"It is a very hard life we lead trying to listen to both the KNPP and the SPDC. We have to balance carefully. If not, we will be punished by one side or the other. We are being treated like mere dirt."* Oppression often goes in a cycle. There is always the potential for the oppressed to become oppressor's, this risk must be taken seriously by all sides.

Villagers suggested that unless KNPP troops spent more time meeting and discussing their plans with the villagers then villagers would misunderstand the work and ideology of the KNPP. Some villagers had also asked the KNPP for permission to set up timber yards in their villages but got no definite answer. These villagers want to build schools, clinics or churches in their villages and some of the villagers also want to build a boarding-house in the town for children who need to go to school there. This lack of communication seriously affects the villager's ability to control their own environment.

Cease-fire groups

After the cease-fire agreement broke down between the KNPP and SLORC (now the SPDC) in 1995, some parties split from the KNPP and surrendered to the SPDC. Now, they participate in operations with SPDC troops. They travel ahead and identify the people who have connections and relationships with the Karenni forces so that these people are arrested, imprisoned and tortured by the SPDC troops. These splinter groups also try to guide the SPDC troops to the jungle hiding places of the Karenni forces.

Instead of protecting the rights of the people, these splinter groups are leading SPDC troops in their persecution of the people. In the areas under the cease-fire groups' control, the SPDC

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Burma's Political Prisoners in the Conflict Zones

In August 2003 Burma Issues and Altsean-Burma will release a report, Uncounted: Political Prisoners in Burma's ethnic areas. The report focuses on people arbitrarily detained in Burma's conflict areas for supposedly supporting ethnic nationality opposition groups.

Why is the report needed?

In his statement to the 59th session of the Commission on Human Rights, the special envoy to Burma, Mr Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, clarified his understanding of a political prisoner.

> *"They are not limited to politicians only: in fact the majority of them are students, teachers, lawyers and other individuals arrested arbitrarily under security laws in connection with a peaceful exercise of their basic requirements for trial fairness and due process."*

The issue of political prisoners in Burma recieves a fair amount of international attention. For the estimated numbers of 1500 that we hear about there are thousands more who go unnoticed and unheard of. These are individuals in Burma's ethnic or conflict zones that are accused of supporting ethnic nationality opposition groups, both armed and political. They are not your typical political prisoner and they are not detained in your typical detention centre. Their names do not appear on any political prisoner lists, their fate often goes unnoticed and unrecorded, yet they are being persecuted for politically motivated reasons. The accusations, the treatment these people receive and the motivations behind such detentions raise many questions this report hopes to give a more complete picture to. It is needed because presently the voices of these people are not being heard. It is necessary because any future for Burma must include recognition of the ethnic opposition issue and constructive ways in dealing with it. It is needed because it highlights the continued oppression of opposing voices in Burma.

The findings of this report represent more than just the issue of political prisoners and how they are treated. It involves political freedom, the legality of opposition parties, human rights abuses, adequate judicial and policing regulations, the acceptance of ethnic diversity and its participation in Burma's political future. This issue has very obvious links to some of the major concerns for Burma's future, both politically and in terms of adequate standards of living.

Burma Issues work with Burma's grassroots communities aims to achieve certain objectives which this type of report fulfills. We aim to allow the marginalised people to have a greater voice in the international community. We also aim to increase grassroots analysis and international understanding of the serious human rights, economic and political issues facing Burma. The voices of the people in this report are often silenced. This report can create a bridge that allows those voices to be heard and be supported by international protection mechanisms and domestic activists so that peace and justice becomes a reality.

Some of the key findings are:

- The political nature of the accusations made in this report are based on varying degrees of support to ethnic nationality opposition groups. The recipients of these accusations therefore need to be recognised as victims of politically motivated detentions and included in the current reporting of political prisoners in Burma.
- 91% of cases included arbitrary detention, 40% of those were detained in military bases and 51% of cases were subjected to torture. Mistreatment and the absence of accountability are common traits of the recorded cases.
- Military bases are used as quasi-detention centres which lack accountability and both internal and external monitoring.
- Military personnel carry out arbitrary detention, torture and extrajudicial killings with impunity and disregard for international law and human rights standards. There is no accountability nor monitoring of soldiers who use these practices. The system of administering justice and building mechanisms of public accountability need serious reform.
- Villagers are targeted for their support of ethnic nationality opposition groups. The existence and participation of opposition groups needs to be an accepted as a legitimate part of the political process.

What needs to be done

- Recognition and inclusion of these cases as political prisoners in existing reporting.
- To allow safe, responsible and independent monitoring and access to the conflict areas to ensure accountable and fair treatment to those detained.
- To cease violations of those detained in military bases. To cease arbitrary detention, torture and extrajudicial killings.
- For the SPDC, the NLD, ethnic nationality groups and other relevant parties to begin tripartite dialogue for the benfit of Burma's political future.
- For international regulatory bodies like the UN to enforce the SPDC's obligations to adhere to international regulations they are signatories to and pressure them to sign and adhere to those they have not signed.
- Legalisation of all opposition political parties and allowing them to operate and participate freely in a democratic system of governance in Burma.

The report will be available on August 9 and can be requested from Burma Issues (durham@mozart.inet.co.th) or Altsean-Burma (altsean@altsean.org). The report will also be available in PDF format from the Burma Issues website www.burmaissues.org

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and continues to perform free-thinking skits against the military, I wanted to tell him of the many people who approach me and tell me their stories, endless stories of hardship and oppression but still they talk with me, talk of their futures. People find ways of dealing with the military and intelligence, they defy their rigid rules and brutal retaliations. They're talking. They're talking. They can do it themselves, they are doing it themselves.

What are your hopes?

What are the hopes from within for the future of Burma and what can bring about the necessary change? One theory is that any outright civil war or civil unrest that weakens the position of the military could bring in China and an annexation similar to Tibet. Many expressed the desire for America and its cowboy antics to remove the generals and install a democratic government. What about the UN and peacekeepers? What no-one seems to be talking about are peaceful alternatives, peaceful options. It is rare to see an intervention from a third country that brings a successful regime change. This will not come from a military offensive from the US, it won't come from a peacful UN intervention, it will only come from empowerment of the people and a revolt from within. It would be nice, wouldn't it, to see a successful non-violent regime change in Burma, a transition that comes from the voices and actions of the people. That would involve the invisible becoming visible, those we find hard to hear being given a voice and of course, a whole lot of patience and perseverance.

R Sharples

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are letting the people log the forest indiscriminately and grow poppy for opium. There are still many poppy fields in the cease-fire groups' areas and they are now involved in the drug trade. They are also collecting illegal taxes from the opium growers. It is clear that the SPDC looks after the leaders of the cease-fire groups well and has control over their economic well-being.

Conclusion

Villagers in this area are clearly facing a multitude of problems that affect their ability to survive. The continued pressure on villagers due to the armed conflict contributes to this. Fear and distrust caused by abuse of power is evident. While villagers continue to be pulled between the Burmese military and the KNPP, mistrust and fear will permeate the lives of villagers. While the limited aid that does reach these areas, continues to be administered through the military, corruption will continue to occur and the people who are most in need of the aid will continue to be denied it. Basic services such as education and healthcare are seriously lacking. Treatable diseases are killing villagers, and both students and teachers are facing difficulties to implement basic education. As long as access to these areas continues to be limited to the Burmese military, foreseeable positive conclusions to these issues are also limited. There is a role for many different groups to play in Burma's ethnic areas but reports like this highlight the inadequacy in which the ethnic conflict areas are often addressed.

BI Staff

news briefs

On the borders

Thai Government representatives met officials from the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) last this month and agreed to relocate 1,600 Burmese exiles that the UNHCR had granted POC status to camps along the Thai-Burmese border. The Joint Action Committee for Democracy in Burma (JACDB) expressed gratitude for being allowed to stay in Thailand but said, *"It is not safe for political dissidents to live in border camps. We could be attacked, kidnapped and killed by Burmese soldiers stationed along the border."*

At least 50,000 children of Burmese migrant labourers have been born in Thai hospitals and denied rights or proper birth certificates, according to an academic from Mahidol University. He said most had no access to education and were denied proper records which prevented them from returning home as Burmese citizens, going to a third country or even staying in Thailand.

Ethnic groups

A rebel group in the north-east Indian state of Nagaland says its headquarters in neighbouring Burma has been destroyed by troops. A spokesman for the Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) told the BBC that Burmese soldiers launched an attack on the group's headquarters with mortars and rockets this month, forcing the rebels to retreat into dense jungle. India closed the border after the attack.

Military Trainings

It was reported that Rangoon military HQs has begun military trainings for a People's Army against outside forces. In a July directive, families of soldiers throughout the country and militia members from villages and wards were told to take part in basic military and firearms handling trainings. Several townships in Mandalay and Taungoo Divisions have already been recruited for the courses

International responses

Burma's junta condemned a United States vote to tighten economic sanctions on the military-run country, describing them as "weapons of mass destruction" that would create havoc. US lawmakers voted overwhelmingly to sanction Burma's government after their new crackdown on the pro-democracy opposition by banning imports, freezing the regime's assets in US banks and imposing a visa ban.

Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, warned that Burma could be dispelled from Asean over the continued detention of Burma's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, saying it could damage Asean's standing. *"I think with time, the longer this issue is allowed to remain unresolved, the more it would constitute a setback, not only to the reconciliation process in Burma itself, but also a setback to Asean ... indirectly,"* Indonesia's Foreign Ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa said.

Politics

Burma's junta released 91 people detained following what the military government said was a clash between backers of pro-democracy movement leader Aung San Suu Kyi and pro-junta people in northern Burma on May 30. Aung San Suu Kyi and several key members of her National League for Democracy (NLD), including NLD Vice Chairman Tin Oo, were among those still detained

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