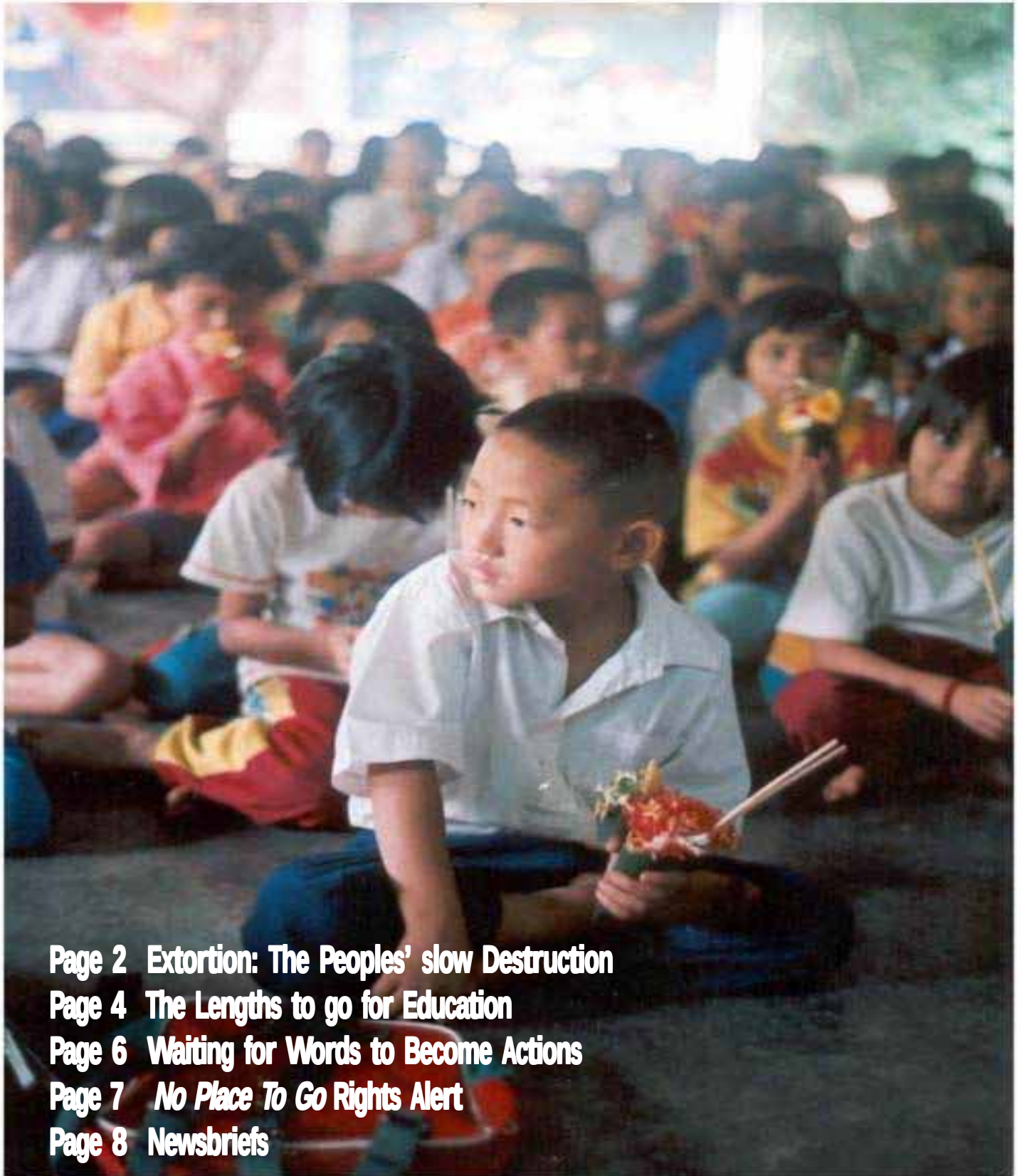




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Page 2 Extortion: The Peoples' slow Destruction

Page 4 The Lengths to go for Education

Page 6 Waiting for Words to Become Actions

Page 7 *No Place To Go* Rights Alert

Page 8 Newsbriefs

EXTORTION: THE PEOPLE'S SLOW DESTRUCTION

Over forty years of military rule in Burma NGO's, human rights groups and individuals have become adept at documenting human rights abuses against a largely civilian population. These acts are often brutal and oppressive, violating a myriad of international and domestic regulations that are meant to protect the rights of these individuals. They can, and often are, held up as indicators against which the SPDC is judged in its ability to govern Burma, and are therefore highly measurable.

But what happens when the use of overt violence by the Burmese military decreases, and not because the SPDC has finally learnt that human rights must be respected but because they have found a different tactic for oppressing the people and consolidating their (the SPDC's) power. One that's not easily measurable and its use not so hotly contested by the international community.

There is increasing evidence that the Burmese military are employing this new strategy. The violence has by no means stopped but in some areas it has certainly been noticeably decreasing, in its place a less "politically hot" form of abuse, the draining impact of extortion.

The outcome is still the same, eventual death, but in this case it's slower, more painful and not so easily attributable to the direct actions of the SPDC. In the end the person may die from a heart attack at the age of 46, brought on by malnourishment, worries from a loss of land and culture, high debt and perhaps the death of a child due to insurgent activities. While no single direct action is responsible, like actually holding a gun to the person's head and shooting them, these actions will contribute to the person's death nevertheless.

Picture a leech, latched to your stomach and sucking away at your life source. While it grows fatter and stronger from your sustenance you grow weaker and poorer. It is not a direct physical harm but a slow ebbing away of your spirit, your ability to survive, and finally your life. In many cases you are ignorant to the

leech even being there, they emerge silently, they silently take from you and then they silently drop away. In much the same way, the use of economic depravation through extortive measures is also leading to the silent destruction of people and cultures from Burma's ethnic groups. There is also the potential of its impact going largely under-estimated. Unless we begin to recognise this shift in the actions of the SPDC and the impact this will have on Burma's future capabilities, the SPDC will have succeeded in yet again diverting attention from their appalling inability to care for their own people.

Documentation from inside Burma shows an increase in acts of extortion that are slowly starving people of their ability to survive. Instances of land confiscation have proliferated as the Burmese Army continues to militarise the ethnic areas. Villagers' gardens and crops are taken, often without compensation, leaving villagers with no food source and little income to survive. They are forced to find alternative incomes, pushing them into lifestyles and employment brackets that are unfamiliar and often insufficient. It is also causing a high level of debt amongst people in Burma which in turn has forced people to either flee and become refugees or look for work as illegal migrants in neighbouring countries. Consistent arbitrary tax levies are also placed upon villagers, the list is endless: porter taxes, development fund taxes, visiting troop's tax, visiting official's tax, tax for sport competitions. These taxes range from 1-2,000 kyat per month and if people can't pay they are often taken as porters or put in confinement until the taxes are paid. Villagers are still required to turn up for forced labour projects, often paraded as development projects that will benefit the villagers. This continues to happen despite

A typical month of taxes for villagers in Burma's ethnic areas

Porter: 500 kyat
Development fund: 200 kyat
Visiting troops: 150 kyat
Visiting officials: 300 kyat
Peoples' militia: 200 kyat
Sport competitions: 300-1000 kyat
Travelling costs for village PDC: 150 kyat

TOTAL: 1800-2500 kyat
Average monthly income of a villager: 2-4000 kyat

* Over 50% of income is taken up by taxes alone: villagers must also spend money on education, health, food etc. from this income

* All prices are per month

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assurances to the ILO and the international community that they are using every resource available to ensure forced labour is eradicated in Burma. Payment, if it comes at all, is minimal and it also takes villagers away from tending their own crops. When a villager is forced to spend three days a week working on a military plantation it leaves little time for tending their own plantations, if they are lucky enough to still have their own plantation.

The bottom line is that villagers are being denied the very basic right to an adequate means of survival. This change in direction shows the Burmese military are now being somewhat savvy about how they deny people this right. Human rights abuses can give very real, very immediate and very factual evidence of the abuse through documentation. The impact of economic extortion on the other hand may not be fully realized until well into the future. But what an impact it will have. The employment of this type of tactic has the potential to cause permanent and long-lasting damage to the future of health, education, economic prosperity, social and civil structures and political stability. It will erode the already basic infrastructure and threaten internal security. These are things that will be more difficult to measure, both in its' impact and its retribution of the perpetrator.

It is important to note that overt forms of violence still exist, there is just evidence that these acts are on the decrease. It is also important to note that documentation of these long-term impact forms of extortion also exists. The challenge is to recognize this shift in strategy of the Burmese military and to ensure that although these acts are less directly attributable to the Burmese military they are still responsible for the outcomes.

If there is indeed, as documentation suggests, a reduction in acts of violence against villagers in Burma's ethnic areas we can guarantee that it hasn't evolved from the sudden appearance of an SPDC conscience. The awareness and criticism directed at the SPDC for their appalling human rights abuse record may be having some effect in reducing these instances. The SPDC are simply deploying other means of ultimately securing the same outcome but without being held accountable. The presence of INGO's inside Burma may also have led to the SPDC's eagerness to show that these border or conflict areas are gaining increasing levels of support and development in areas of education, health and economic growth and are not the human rights abuse hotspots they are portrayed as.

This then confirms their statements of actively working for a developed and prosperous nation that benefits all people. It also places them in a more positive light to the international community. I would also suggest that it indicates a more concerted effort by the SPDC to gain the support of villagers. In this, we can perhaps see a struggle between the SPDC and the opposition groups for the support of villagers in these communities. The SPDC has waged an often violent and intensive war against any representation from opposition groups and the support or oppression of the people has often been seen as an important strategy for winning this war.

What will be the end result then? People pushed to the very margins not only of society, but also their ability to survive. Policies that deliberately restrict and erode a functioning and effective infrastructure. A military government that has succeeded in consolidating its power and destroying opposition whilst using less and less overt violence to achieve this. The question for the international community and those working on Burma then is, how will we respond to this shift in policy and how can the SPDC be held accountable for this systematic, long-term destruction of its people and its civil, political and economic capabilities. Perhaps in the future, there will be less and less acts of physical violence and thus less chance to use these violations as evidence against the SPDC. Instead there will be more and more violations of peoples economic and civil rights, violations with long-term impact as opposed to immediate repercussions. We must be prepared to hold these up as equally destructive violations and the Burmese military as equally responsible for the destructive outcomes.



R Sharples

Democracy involves...

The participation of grassroots people

This includes those who are outside the power-making structures of society and struggle daily to survive. The people who are directly affected by governing decisions and yet are removed from any power to contribute to this system of governance. Democracy is giving these people a voice in deciding and participating in their choice of governance based on a true justice.

THE LENGTHS TO GO FOR EDUCATION

"At that time, my mother was very afraid and did not want to die. Whatever the soldiers told her to do, she would obey. If she had to carry guns, she would do it. She couldn't bear it anymore so we escaped to the Thai side. If I was to compare living in Thailand to living in Burma, living in Thailand is better as there was no education in Burma. My mother told me that at that time, she would always bury and hide her things and pray that in the future, her children would not have to suffer like her. That's why today we get to go to school."

Ah Per*, 13 year old boy, Akha, student, Mae Sai, Thailand

Everyday young *Ah Per and his 8 year old brother make the trip across the border from Tachilek, in Burma to Mae Sai in Northern Thailand to attend a non-formal education school run by a local Children's Development Centre. Interviewed by *Burma Issues* their mother said she does not fear for their safety and even if it were otherwise her overriding desire for her children to receive an adequate education and escape her fate would keep them coming. In Burma their village school only continues to Grade 4. Her children were receiving good grades at school and she wanted to encourage them to continue their education. She believes the schools in Thailand have a better curriculum and offer a better quality of education. She is confident that when their schooling is completed they can get identification cards and find work in Thailand. Last year when the border was closed the family rented a small house in Mae Sai and lived illegally just so their children could continue to attend school. Why risk arrest, jail and deportation for an education? The answer to this lies in the state of Burma's education system.

Burma's military government spends an estimated 50 percent of the country's national budget on defense and according to a UNICEF report in 2001 only 7% on Education. Not surprisingly teachers are underpaid. Most teachers earn a basic salary of 4,000 - 5,000 Kyat (US\$4-5) per month but with government officers taking their cut of this it is reduced to about 3,000 to 4,000 Kyat (US\$3-4).¹ Schools are under funded and under resourced, subject to frequent 'security-related' closures and there

are simply not enough of them to cater for the population. The education system in Burma falls woefully short of meeting students needs. Even this limited education is often beyond the reach of most large families who have to sacrifice one child's education for another. The average Burmese civil servant wage of 5,000 to 6,000 Kyat (US\$5-6) per month means paying for school fees is a struggle. For those earning less it is virtually impossible to meet education costs. Parents must pay an initial 3,000 Kyat enrolment fee for primary education and then at least 500 Kyat each month of in-school tuition not including extra curricular expenses.² In the countryside the situation is compounded by lower monthly incomes combined with the scarcity of Government schools (see figures box). Many villages have to fund and run 'affiliated schools' themselves. With text books and schools supplies limited or sold to students by corrupt government officials at vastly inflated prices (30 Kyat per book as opposed to the official 5 Kyat per book³), some rural regions still use a slate and chalk pencil.

In comparing his education in Thailand to that he received in Burma, Ah Per pointed out that in Burma *"The school does not have any other activities to do, like sports, exercise, or arts and drawing."* Underpaid, with limited resources and a poor curriculum it is a challenge for Burma's teachers to provide a quality education. Ah Per goes on to say "if there is fighting, then the schools would close." Buying into the ruling junta's promotion of a culture-of-fear it seems educators may take a strict line with their young charges.

Anne* is a 15 year old student at the same centre as Ah Per, she is Thai Yai (a minority ethnic group in Burma). She left her parents and older brother in Burma to join her sister in Mae Sai. They live above a restaurant where they work each night. Anne came to Thailand because she was guaranteed work and the prospect of an education. After graduating from the non-formal school she is participating in a Vocational Training course. Anne shared with *Burma Issues* that; *"The teaching method in*



Burma is very strict. If I read or write something incorrectly, they will take off my pants and make me stand on the table and they will use a stick to hit me. Or sometimes they make me stand in front of the school and have all the children in kindergarten pull my ears. Sometimes they even make me pay a fine equivalent to 1 Baht, or about 15 Kyats."

Even for the 2% of students lucky enough to graduate high school The Irrawaddy wrote in July this year that "schooling (in Burma) guarantees few returns"⁴. Job opportunities are scarce, as a result, after completing school people have to pay bribes to get jobs, or cannot find any employment at all.⁵ This is one of the reasons Anne is now in Thailand. She said "At that time, I was in Grade 4 about to go on to Grade 5 but my mother sent me to the Thai side to go to school. My mother told me that she does not want me to be like her. She finished school in Burma and still she could not find work. I think if I studied in Thailand, I will have a better chance of finding work. Some of my friends (in Burma) have finished school and they still can't find work."

Ah Per and Anne are both students in educational programs run by a Children's Development Centre dedicated to the protection and promotion of Child Rights. The Centre offers non-formal education, vocational training, as well as full-time accommodation combined with a formal Thai education that mirrors the Thai curriculum. The majority of children who attend the centre are from ethnic Minorities in Burma: Thai Yai (Shan) and Ahka. The Centre subsequently learnt that the majority of these children were living with families who were in Thailand illegally. Despite their precarious status as illegal aliens in Thailand these people continue to "flee Burma to escape civil war and extreme human rights abuses".⁶ One positive consequence of this, if that can be said, is that children of these illegal migrants have the opportunity to receive an education most would only dream of at home in Burma. Some families even migrate to Mae Sai for this very reason. Life in Thailand is preferable for these families to the grinding poverty of unemployment in Burma, and the limited options for a reasonable education that would allow the children of these families to escape the fate of their parents. The provision of education and other social services at the Centre is an attempt to make these children and their families less marginalised, and less at-risk, improving their ability to earn income and reducing their vulnerability.

At The Centre 61% of the 139 children in the day school program are from families that have migrated from Burma. Residing illegally in

The Figures

■ In Burma 68% of male children and 69% of female children are enrolled in Primary school - compared with a regional average of 95%. Only 45% of these will reach Grade 5 - compared with a regional average of 87%. (The State of the World's Children 2002, United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF)

■ According to United Nations Figures, 98 percent of Burmese students drop out before finishing highschool. (The Irrawaddy, July 2003, Vol.11 No.6, Hard Lessons)

■ According to World Bank Figures Burma's military Government spends a measly 28 cents a year for every child in a public school. (The Irrawaddy, July 2003, Vol.11 No.6, Hard Lessons)

■ In areas where Burman populations dominate, there is a primary school for every 5 villages, but in areas closer to the border, 1 primary school is often shared by as many as 25 villages. (The Irrawaddy, July 2003, Vol.11 No.6, Hard Lessons)

■ For 12 years from September 1988 to July 2000 universities and colleges were only open for 36 months, or a total of 3 years. (The Irrawaddy, July 2003, Vol.11 No.6, Hard Lessons)

Mae Sai families live with the ever present risk of capture by Thai authorities. According to Anne *"now it is very difficult to live in Thailand because we don't have an identity card. When they were cracking down on people without identity cards, we had to run away and hide."* Despite this, these families prefer to remain in Thailand than return to Burma.

But education in Thailand is not all rosy. For some children, living full-time at The Centre comes with its own attendant discriminations as Noo*, an 18 year old student of Jin How heritage who has lived at The Centre for 7 years told *Burma Issues*; *"My friends never say anything or tease me about coming from Burma, but most of the teachers are the ones to discriminate against us. For example, the teachers will question if we are Thai and criticize why we can't read or write Thai."* Despite these discriminations Noo has chosen to complete senior high in the Thai system (one of only a handful of students who have chosen to do this). Noo is in the process of applying for Thai citizenship and she recognizes the advantages The Centre has given her compared to other children from Burma. She says; *"If the staff at the center had not helped me, I would probably be no different to the children that live under the bridges, and I would probably*

continued on p 7

BURMA: WAITING FOR WORDS TO BECOME ACTIONS

On August 26 Burma's ruling military government announced a reshuffle of their cabinet that saw Gen Than Shwe take on the role of President and the former Secretary 1, Gen Khin Nyunt take on the newly installed position of Prime Minister, effectively making him responsible for the day-to-day political running of the country. One of his first duties after becoming Prime Minister was to deliver a speech that, amongst a lot of fluffy words and self-praise, introduced the SPDC's own Road Map of Myanmar, a 7 point-plan that outlined their political program for rebuilding the nation. Unfortunately these 7 points were merely repetitive of past words and failed actions. The speech itself was more memorable for what it did not mention than any innovative new ways to deal with Burma's political conflict and transition.

There was:

- No mention of the ethnic issue nor how this will be resolved for future governance;
- No mention of Aung San Suu Kyi or her release, nor the NLD and what role they will play in the future political environment;
- No detailed plan of how to implement the 7 point plan;

An important issue that becomes apparently obvious then is the role of words and actions and how words should be implemented into action. The

SPDC are experts at producing words, hollow words that imply their willingness for change and reform but a more mechanisms for stalling the progress of political reform and transition. They are words that become meaningless and in the process destroy hope for the future.

The fact is, words alone will not produce a stable, progressive and prosperous country. Words must be followed through with action. Concrete and descriptive plans should be made, detailed time-frames for their implementation given, and once put into action monitoring of progress is an absolute necessity.

How long are the people of Burma and the international community willing to put up with these words? Diplomacy and patience are very important concepts when dealing with political instability and transition. But diplomacy and patience require certain levels of commitment from both sides, this commitment is seriously absent from the SPDC's agenda. The people of Burma deserve a governing body that takes their lives seriously, that is committed to creating a safe environment to live, a sufficient level of livelihood, that treats human rights and their implementation with respect. It is time for words to be turned into action, we should no longer be settling for anything less.



Pakeh

The SPDC's 7 point plan:

1. Reconvening of the National Convention that has been adjourned since 1996.
2. After the successful holding of the National Convention, step by step implementation of the process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic system.
3. Drafting of a new constitution in accordance with basic principles and detailed basic principles laid down by the National Convention.
4. Adoption of the constitution through national referendum.
5. Holding of free and fair elections for Pyithy Hluttaws (Legislative bodies) according to the new constitution.
6. Convening of Hluttaws attended by Htullaw members in accordance with the new constitution.
7. Building a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the Htullaw; and the government and other central organs formed by the Hluttaw.

The author's proposed 7 point-plan:

1. Empowerment of all parties in Burma to participate in dialogue. This includes building the capacity of the grassroots and civil society as well as opposition political parties. It means allowing these groups to form associations and giving them the freedom to participate in, and voice their concerns over, how their country should be governed.
2. A people's dialogue between representative parties that builds practical, inclusive and just systems for governance.
3. De-militarisation of the border or ethnic areas which will allow a reduction in military spending and more revenue dispersed amongst essential services such as healthcare and education. Saying nothing of the millions of lives and livelihoods that will be saved once armed conflict is eradicated from these areas.
4. Reconvening of the National Convention and the establishment of a Constitution. Both of these need to be inclusive of a wide range of participants that represent various levels of society.
5. Serious capacity building of basic infrastructure and essential services. These should focus on the education system, healthcare and independent and responsible judicial and policing systems. This should also include electoral and corruption monitoring mechanisms.
6. Once this kind of stability has been achieved it is essential that a tribunal be set up to hear grievances and adjudicate on the perpetrators of human rights violations. This is important in establishing future reconciliation.
7. If all the above fail then Aung San Suu Kyi, or someone who has the respect that people will follow and listen to, goes to the northern tip of Kachin State, gets out of her car and starts a Ghandi style salt walk towards Rangoon. Along the way she talks to the people and invites others to join in on her journey. Farmers, civil servants, mother's father's and children, students, factory workers, all join her in her walk. By the time they reach Rangoon their numbers are in the millions, they amass in front of the town hall: 100,000, a million, 10 million people. And in one voice they cry out "freedom to be".

WITNESS and BURMA ISSUES Rights Alert Online Video: No Place to Go: Internally Displaced People in Burma

In July the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act, which has been hailed as the toughest international action to date to support the struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma. The bill includes a ban on all imports from Burma and on travel to the U.S. by members of the regime, and calls for the U.S. to vote against loans to the Burmese government from the World Bank or IMF.

The time is now to keep the pressure for change going. We now encourage you to take action on behalf of the over one million people in Burma forced to flee their homes by the military junta. Please watch the new WITNESS Rights Alert Video Online at www.witness.org and follow the links to Act Now. Tell a friend about this situation, and how they can act.

In No Place to Go, from WITNESS partner BURMA ISSUES, ethnic Karen villagers from Burma speak out about their first-hand experiences of repression by the Burmese government and military. Their villages have been destroyed; they face arbitrary executions and forced labor, and they have been forcibly relocated or displaced by the Burmese military. One villager recounts, "the SPDC troops (Burmese government military) started to come in our area. This time our villagers got really hurt. People were raped, people were killed and the soldiers took their belongings. And their rice stores were burned"; Another is asked how many times they had had to escape into the jungle in the previous year. He responded, "I can't even count. We escaped so many times."

Although there is mounting pressure following the Burmese regime's recent crackdown on the

pro-democracy movement and imprisonment of Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, the government simultaneously continues to repress and forcibly remove people from their homes in rural and ethnic minority areas, largely out of sight of the international community.

The Burmese government's repression in controlling ethnic minority areas has created over one million refugees within their own country. These are formally known as internally displaced people (IDPs); forced from their own homes and unable to resettle or to leave the country.

ACT NOW:

Watch the video at www.witness.org/jsrightsalert.html?bi+story1 to learn more about IDPs and find out what you can do:

- Support activist groups campaigning for change in Burma;
- Boycott companies with investments in Burma;
- Donate to groups working with IDPs in Burma.

No Place to Go is a production of long-time WITNESS partner BURMA ISSUES, a non-profit organization devoted to a peaceful resolution to Burma's struggle for human rights and freedom. Based in Thailand and founded in 1990, BURMA ISSUES works directly with oppressed and marginalized communities, focusing specifically on grassroots education, organizing and community building. To learn more about their work, visit their Web site www.burmaissues.org.

continued from p 5

be drawn to drugs. I would probably be very frustrated as there is no way out."

When Ah Per finishes school he would like to work in an office and Anne would like to study to be a doctor to help sick people. Whether or not these children realise their childhood dreams they have been given an opportunity for education far beyond that of their parents. As Ah Per concludes; *"I believe education is very important to me because if I cannot read or write, then other people who are smarter than me will take advantage of me or trick me. If I am literate, I will understand and be able to communicate. My mother wants me to live on the Thai side, but my mother does not have an*

identity card so she cannot live with us. If I do not have an education, then it is like being blind."

*Names have been changed

(Footnotes)

- 1 BI Internal Document
- 2 The Foreign Affairs Committee of the Thai-based All Burma Federation of Student Unions, ABFSU
- 3 Ibid 1
- 4 The Irrawaddy, July 2003, Vol.11 No.6, Hard Lessons
- 5 Ibid 1
- 6 Burmese Migrant Women in Thailand, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, 1999



Jum Juree

jrema&

news briefs

political hip hop.

A new rap song about the decline of Burmese society and the need for democracy was released online by a Burmese group in September. The seven-minute "Lu Nge Anthem 2003," ("Youth Anthem 2003") by Myanmar Future Generations features samples of the Burmese national anthem and the voice of opposition Aung San Suu Kyi, plus a rap by the band members. "We created this song on behalf of Burmese youth who are willing to serve their country as they can," said a unnamed band member in an interview with Burma Today News, an online newsgroup covering Burma. The song calls on Burmese to resist passivity and become engaged in work for the good of the country.

activists arrested on anniversary.

Thai police arrested fifteen Burmese activists staging a demonstration in front of the Burmese embassy in Bangkok on the 15th anniversary of the coup which installed the current junta. Police broke up the demonstration early in the morning and rounded up the participants, who represented several different Burmese

opposition organizations. Those arrested were immediately sent to the capital's Immigration Detention Center, said Aung Nai Htwe, spokesperson of the Joint Action Committee for Democracy, who was detained and reached at the center by telephone.

suu kyi not on hunger strike.

The US State Department stated pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi had gone on a hunger strike to protest her detention by the country's military rulers this month. It prompted international calls of concern for her safety and her immediate release. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were allowed to visit her to check on her condition and confirmed that she was not on a hunger strike and was in good health.

prisoners shot dead in bassein.

Prisoners at Bassein Prison in Lower Burma who have been staging hunger strikes for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi were fired upon by the SPDC security forces and at least four prisoners were killed and many are said to be wounded although exact numbers remained unclear. According to a

statement by the NCGUB, common prisoners also joined the political prisoners in staging the hunger strikes. Security forces came to the prison on Monday and brutally quelled the rebellion. According to unconfirmed reports, seven of the wounded died later at the hospital. About 150 prisoners were taken away from Bassein Prison in 2 trucks but it is not known where they were taken.

funding for ICRC.

Australia announced a \$A500,000 (\$US331,000) contribution to support the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Burma. The Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, says the funding underlines the importance of the Red Cross having access to all political detainees, including the Democracy Party leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Mr Downer says he has called repeatedly on the Burmese regime to release Suu Kyi and to give the Red Cross access to detainees. He says the work of the Red Cross includes humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable minority groups in the border states and visits to political detainees, which have been permitted since 1999.

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