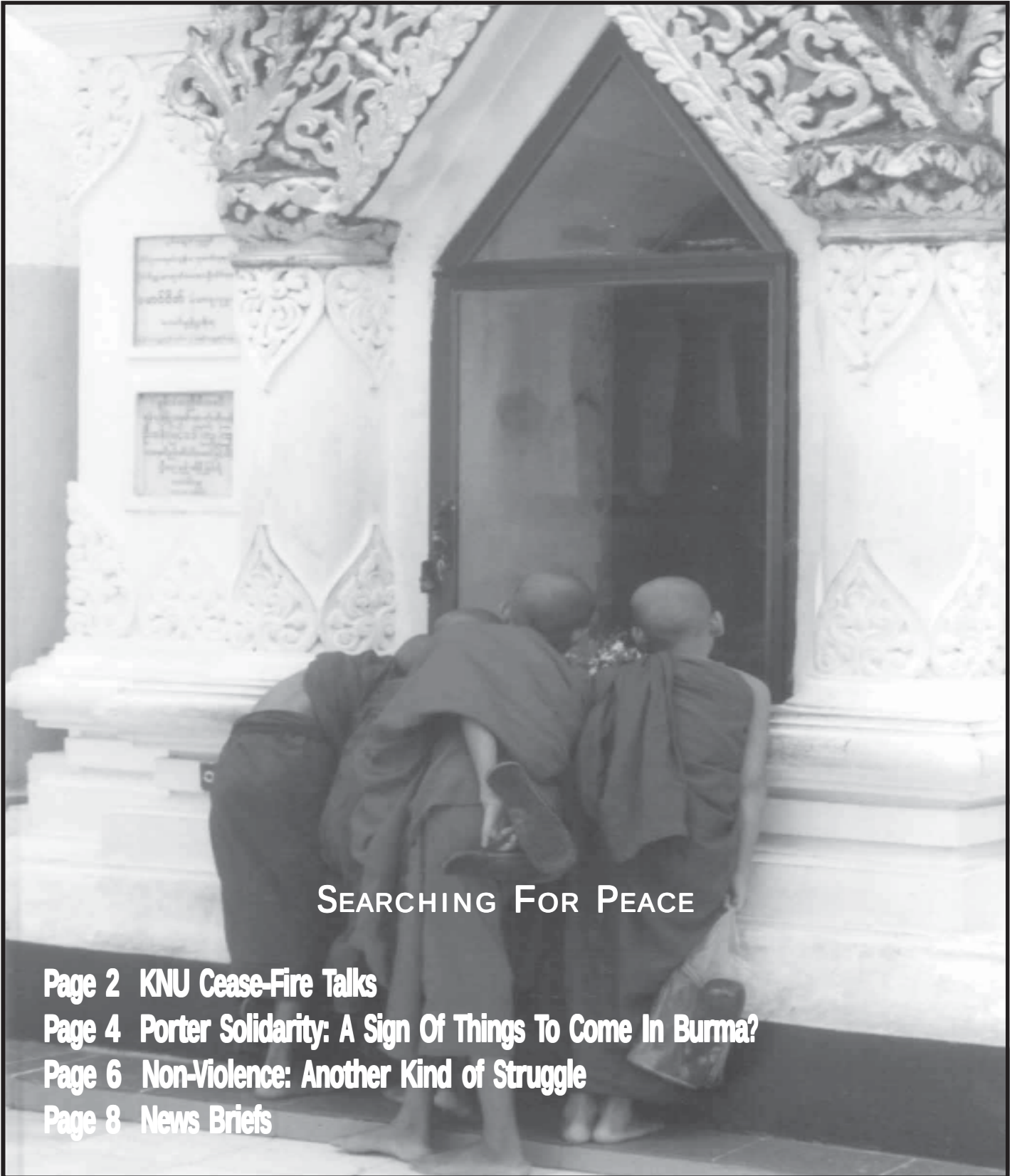




Burma Issues

March 2004

VOLUME 14 NUMBER 3



SEARCHING FOR PEACE

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KNU CEASEFIRE TALKS : NEGOTIATING A RETURN TO THE "LEGAL FOLD" AND THE FATE OF MILLIONS OF KARENS BY C. GUINARD

Should the Karen National Union (KNU) give the SPDC Generals the benefit of the doubt?

That is the question on the mind of every actor involved directly or indirectly in the armed struggle for self-determination the KNU has been waging for more than fifty-five years. Following three rounds of "peace" talks held by General Khin Nyunt, Prime Minister of the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council), and a KNU delegation led by General Bo Mya, Vice Chairman of the rebel group, thousands of voices of Karen people, living inside Burma and in exile, as well as activists, oppositions groups, democratic organizations, and ethnic groups are starting to express their concerns, doubts, fears and criticisms over the process. But among all this skepticism, many people are also sharing their hope for a brighter future for Karen and all people living in Burma.

The political deadlock has gone on too long. Too many innocent civilians have been killed, tortured, extorted... Too many families have been forced to flee their villages after seeing them torched by SPDC troops... Too many children are still starving and in urgent need of education and healthcare. These are the reasons why, after more than fifty-five years of conflict, Karen people are praying for a peaceful resolution which will allow them to return to their land but also to regain their dignity.

Burma Issues is a publication of the Peace Way Foundation and is distributed on a free-subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned with the state of affairs in Burma.

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Two rounds of talks already took place in Rangoon in December 2003 and January 2004. During those talks, both parties agreed on a "gentlemen's" ceasefire agreement and started discussing issues such as territory demarcations and the return of internally-displaced Karen. Unfortunately, the third round of talks in late February in Moulmein ended after only two days. During the meeting, KNU troops from the 3rd Brigade attacked a Burma Army outpost forty miles away, delaying and jeopardizing further negotiations.

Now, once again, distrust, uncertainty and criticism are on the rise...

Both parties, as well as Karen people and activists, must realize that violence and tensions may not decrease significantly even with several rounds of negotiations. With pragmatism, time and good faith, the SPDC and the KNU have to find common solutions to past conflicts in order to negotiate a coherent and lasting settlement. That is the only way out for one of the longest intra-state conflicts in modern history. Even Winston Churchill, a man known more for his prowess in war than in peace, asserted that *"courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."* The next round of talks has been scheduled to happen in May. The SPDC and the KNU will have to sit down and listen to each other. It is a question of necessity. We have to give the Generals the benefit of the doubt, to at least try something other than fighting...

The KNU has discussed the possibility of a cease-fire under certain pre-conditions several times in the past ten years. But negotiations always failed, creating more hatred between both parties and more reprisal against Karen people. So what is the context of the current talks? Why does the KNU seem more ready than ever to negotiate peace? What are the benefits and risks Karen people will face if such a settlement is reached?

In August, 2003, newly appointed Prime Minister Khin Nyunt announced a seven-step "Road Map" for national reconciliation, the first step of which was to reconvene the National Convention to draft a new constitution. Many argue that the SPDC wants Karen participation in this process only because it will help the

world to forget that Aung San Suu Kyi is still under house arrest following the Depayin event in May, 2003, and that her party, the National League for Democracy, has been steadily repressed since that time. The SPDC thus seems to need the KNU's participation to give any credibility to its "Road Map", so its first step is to negotiate a ceasefire with the KNU. With such an agreement, and the elimination of most of the counter-insurgency in border areas, the SPDC can pretend to the world that its "Road Map" is not just another farce. Solely in terms of changing the SPDC's international image, this strategy might be successful. If the international community answers by lifting sanctions, the SPDC will be in a better position than ever to ascend to the highly respected position of ASEAN presidency in 2006, as it scheduled to do.

Besides the international strategizing that may be behind this latest move, some also suggest that the SPDC is once again conducting a calculated "divide and rule" policy and that reaching a ceasefire agreement with the KNU would be a fatal blow to Burma's Thai-based opposition groups. Indeed, it would certainly change the configuration of power along the border and foment splits within the KNU. Many KNU officers admitted not even being aware of the first round of talks when it took place in Rangoon. Such communications problems may lead to serious divisions within KNU leadership. In addition, many worry that the SPDC is also applying its 1992 strategy of converting political issues into economic ones by including a set of economic concessions in the ceasefire agreement, as they did years ago in negotiations with the Kachin Independence Organization and the New Mon State Party. But the KNU is not blind to this issue: KNU Secretary General Mahn Sha said recently that the SPDC "destroyed democracy groups, and now they have turned their sights on destroying the ethnic groups as well." ("Borderlines Friends", *Irrawaddy*, Feb 2004)

So is the current situation so desperate for the KNU? The KNU may have no choice but to come to the bargaining table. Their aim, once again, is to stop a civil war and improve the lives of millions of Karen. This, it would seem, is reason for hope, not despair! However, it is true that the KNU is facing more difficulties than ever. The group has lost territory steadily in recent decades, and seen declines in its funds, and also in its artillery supply. In addition, the Thai buffer zone policy has been officially abandoned by the current Thai government. Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is keen

to increase border trade, tourism and investment with Thailand's poor neighbor. For that reason, the Thai government and some Thai businessmen are increasing pressure on the KNU to demilitarize the border region. With the end of the insurgency in Karen State, business and border trade could start and benefits could soon be reaped by both Burma and Thailand.

In this regional context, the KNU may have no choice but to negotiate a ceasefire. However, since the SPDC also needs this participation for its international image, the KNU may be in a position to negotiate a fair and balanced agreement, despite doubts. To reach such an agreement, the KNU would have to elaborate a systematic plan with clear issues to settle and fair solutions on offer. Such issues as territorial demarcation, return of internally displaced persons (IDP's), landmines clearance, release of Karen political prisoners and a final political settlement must all be addressed. To achieve a fair settlement, the KNU has to be united and must increase information-sharing about the whole process within its own ranks, and also with all Karen. Participation is needed at every level so that the KNU can take into consideration the opinions and concerns of all Karen people. The KNU must be in solidarity with its people, from the grassroots communities living in remote areas in Karen State to the ones living in exile in foreign countries. All these voices must be heard in order to ensure that the ceasefire is understood, integrated and respected. Education of the grassroots communities and IDPs is now critical, as these will be the first people to face the consequences, good or bad, of the ceasefire. They need to know what this deal is all about, they need to trust their leaders and be sure that there will be no more fighting and no more abuse of villagers. With such awareness and participation, and guarantees concerning the elimination of landmines and human rights abuses, IDP's may be able to stop living in fear and settle again, refugees may accept being repatriated, and the KNU avoid becoming an economic pawn for the SPDC. A peaceful environment in Karen State with no more fighting and killing may then become a reality.

"There is nothing glamorous, naïve, or idealistic about peace. Peace is not a dream; it is hard work. We must choose to walk the path of peace and persevere even when our prospects for success look dim." This quote is from Dr. Oscar Arias, former President of Costa Rica and 1987 Nobel Peace Laureate for the Esquipulas Peace Plan in Central America. It reminds us that military means will never truly solve any conflicts. When some safeguards are implemented, peace negotiation is the solution, even though, like all worthwhile things, it is hard work.



PORTER SOLIDARITY:

A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME IN BURMA?

BY A. ROBB

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances - to choose one's own way."

-Victor Frankl (1905-1997) Holocaust survivor and psychologist

This past September, in what has come to be known as the 7th Brigade Offensive, increased fighting broke out between the Burmese military and the Karen National Union. During this offensive, the Burmese military engaged hundreds of prison porters—inmates from Burma's prisons taken and used as forced labor to support Burmese military units. This represented a gross violation of International Labor Organization conventions (Convention Against Forced Labour ILO No. 29), of Burmese law (Order No 1/99), and of internationally accepted human rights. But that is not what this is about.

In launching this offensive, the SPDC brought about another increase in the level of militarization of ethnic regions of Burma. This resulted in the further devastation of rural villages, hundreds or even thousands of people becoming internally displaced persons (IDP's), and an increase in refugees crossing the border into Thailand. But that is not what this is about either.

Amidst all this warfare, destruction, and oppression, one might expect to find despair, frustration, and anger. Indeed, if you looked for these things, you would probably find them. However, if you were looking for hope, for solidarity and cooperation, you would also be able to find these, even in the turmoil that the Burmese military junta has caused. BI interviewed many of the porters turned refugees who had escaped from the Burmese military that had enslaved them. Some of what we found was hopeful, and maybe that shouldn't be too surprising. This is about what often happens when people find themselves together in the most difficult circumstances: they help one another.

After several days serving as porters, these men were totally worn out. They were not given enough to eat, not given enough rest,

and had to carry impossibly heavy loads for hours and hours every day in mountainous areas. In addition, it is well known that ethnic rural areas of Burma are heavily mined. These porters had to cross large stretches of treacherous lands, and were even used as human mine-sweepers, sent ahead of the soldiers as tests to see if paths were mined. In more than one case, this turned tragic, as some were seriously injured by landmines. This gives an idea of just how difficult it would be to escape, but many of these porters decided that they had to try, and that they would support each other in their attempts.

Maung Aung tells how he and his friend had the opportunity to escape, but only after both of them had spent several days carrying heavy loads (of forty kilograms or more) without enough food, water or rest. Maung Aung was far too weak to run away on his own, but luckily, he had his friend to support him. "When we escaped," he remembers, "I had no strength left at all but he took care of me very well. When I could not walk, he carried me on his back." Instead of running off on his own, so that he could escape much more quickly, Maung Aung's friend chose to help someone else. Fortunately, both men eventually got away, but Maung Aung's friend must have known, when he was carrying Maung Aung on his back, that he would have had a much better chance at survival on his own. In a similar situation another porter, Maung Htoo, escaped with three other friends, but one of them was soon injured by a landmine. "He told us to run for our lives and not to worry about him," recalls Maung Htoo. "We tried to carry him for a while," until, exhausted by days of hard labor and lack of rest or food, they had to leave him and run to get help. In this case, the story has a sad ending, because when Maung Htoo returned with help, his friend had already died. But Maung Htoo and the men he had escaped with did whatever they could to save someone else's life, even though they knew that their own lives were in danger every moment after they escaped from the army camp.

A Karen porter, Saw Po Keg, used to borrow his neighbor's bicycle to get to work every day. Due to a misunderstanding, one day the neighbor thought the bicycle had been stolen, and called

the police. Saw Po Keg was arrested, but his neighbor realized that it was all a mistake, and told the police that no crime had been committed after all. It was too late though, and Saw Po Keg was sentenced to four years in prison. (Murderers in Burma are sometimes sentenced to shorter terms.) Later, he was sent from prison to be a porter. When he arrived at the military base, they divided the equipment between Saw Po Keg and the eighty other prisoner-porters who had also been forced to serve. With forty-eight kilograms of weight on his back, he had to travel for several days on very little food and rest. Those who became too weak to walk were tortured and beaten by the soldiers, and Saw Po Keg was among those beaten. On the fourth day, Saw Po Keg was sent along with some other porters to fetch water to carry back to camp. He and a Burmese friend saw an opportunity, and made their escape. But their story wasn't over yet.



"We hadn't gone very far when my friend stood on a landmine and his leg was blown off. I carried him for a distance and then we saw a hut so I put him in there. When I was carrying him I also stood on a landmine but luckily it wasn't live – I knew because there was no cap showing. I was very weak and left my friend in the hut as I didn't have the strength to carry him. I continued my escape."

Tragically, when he returned with help, his friend was already dead from loss of blood. Still, this story shows how Saw Po Keg risked his own life, and almost lost it, when he himself stepped on a landmine, trying to save his friend. In a moment of extreme danger to both men, he chose not to abandon his friend and save himself, but to do what he could so that they might both be safe. Even though one was Karen and the other was Burmese, they were united in their enslavement by the military. The SPDC may be extremely powerful, with the firepower

to flatten villages and turn ordinary villagers into refugees and IDP's, but it has not destroyed what makes people human. They support each other as much as they can, even when it may mean sacrificing themselves.

This kind of solidarity among the porters shows that the SPDC is failing at one of its most important goals: they can terrorize people and subject them to unfair and sometimes

inhuman treatment, but they cannot take away their hope. No matter how much war they make, or how many battalions of soldiers they send, the people will always know that a better future is possible. This is not to say that the culture of violence that the SPDC causes does not have bad effects on the Burmese people—as Maung Htoo says, "the treatment of the villagers has changed the character of the

villagers, they only see violence and oppression"—but it can never overpower their fundamental goodness and willingness to help one another. Perhaps it will be this solidarity among the people that will eventually win the fight for a more fair, democratic society in Burma. After all, if we see such courage and cooperation among the people, then shouldn't the state reflect the values of the people? In the end, this is about change for the better, change that starts in just a few people who help each other even though they might be better off on their own, but that blooms and develops into change for a whole nation.



Endnotes:

All quotations are from interviews done by BI in October, 2003.

All names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

NON-VIOLENCE: A DIFFERENT KIND OF STRUGGLE BY A. ANDRIEUX

It would be useless to remark again that the Burmese military junta is one of the most ruthless dictatorships in the world. It would be repetitive to list once again all the human rights violations perpetrated by the SPDC, or to write again about the disastrous situation inside Burma. It would be wrong, however, to say that the situation is hopeless.

There is a hope. Even more than a hope, there is a real, concrete, active movement operating inside Burma. The majority of Burmese have chosen to struggle, by non-violent means, because violence generates violence, and because the ultimate victory would be not only to sweep out the dictatorship, but also to establish a new, peaceful political system. That is the strategy of the non-violent movement. The forces of non-violence have been active for many years. It is not always easy to see but it is true. Take time to look at the news carefully, and you will discover something amazing.

The pragmatism of Non - violence.

Non-violence can be a way of life. In Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi – the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner and leader of the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy – is still under house arrest. She represents the most important voice for non-violent resistance in Burma. Certain that a democracy cannot be built on violence, hatred and revenge, she applies non-violent principles in her political struggle. Hers is most of all a struggle for human rights and peace, and not for revenge, or to mete out punishment to the SPDC. She, along with many other groups and people, realizes that non-violence can be the most powerful weapon of all.

People's future, people's will.

The pro-democratic movement in Burma is composed of an incredible number of different organizations. Some have chosen armed struggle, some are exiled, some are ethnic... One might think that, faced with such a powerful dictatorship, only armed struggle could succeed and that we have to fight fire with fire. However, when we look at armed groups in Burma and especially their constant ceasefire bids, we see that weapons are not the better way. Or one might suppose that exiled groups are the hope of the future, since they have better access to information and more freedom of speech than those inside the country. However,

for a Burmese resistance movement to work, it must be attuned to the will of the people, so it must stem from inside the country.

The main source of power is you.

Yet, how can the people hope to counter the junta in its specific field of power – in war...?

The military junta uses coercive power to rule the country, to terrorize the people. But armed force is not the only type of power – there are many things ordinary people can do. For example, what can the military do against people who refuse to shop in the same places as officials or members of the military elite?¹ The people still have some liberty, trivial though it might seem, but they can use this to contribute to undermining the junta's power, perhaps leading it to acknowledge its own illegitimacy. The SPDC – and all the coercive regimes in the world – thinks that power is something that one gets by one's hierarchical position. Dictators are the last ones to consider non-violence as powerful: that is the advantage of non-violent liberation movements, especially in Burma. Everybody is powerful in their own way. Power shouldn't be considered as something given but as a result of human relations. So imagine adding together the individual power of a whole people! They become more powerful than any weapon.

A well coordinated 'dis-organization.'

From a western point of view, so many organizations might not seem well organized. Apart from the NLD which is a key actor of the non-violent movement, there is no headquarters, no official leader of the whole movement. It can be hard to find unity in the multiplicity of actions led by a multiplicity of actors: students, activists, political prisoners, women, intellectuals, monks, people... But it is precisely this "dis-organization" that is the strength of the movement. It is so spread out that it is impossible to eradicate: sharing the same goal, acting by different means, they become more powerful than a single group could be. The mere fact that the SPDC has not been able to eradicate them after more than fifty years of concentrated efforts shows how strong and deep-rooted these movements are.

The strategy of the Burmese non-violent movement.

The Burmese non-violent movement can be divided into two parts: Resistance and Struggle. "Resistance" consists in educating, informing

Strategies of Non-Violence

RESISTANCE

Awareness Action: educational or informative actions which aim to arouse the people's awareness to organize the struggle. *Ex:* Ko Aung Tun's history of the student movement in Burma.

Non-Acceptance: people show they refuse the ruling power through symbolic actions. *Ex:* For the 83rd anniversary of National Day in 2003, 100 NLD members paid tribute at the stone monument on a terrace at the golden domed Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon.

Constructive Program: people themselves create institutions that the SPDC refuses to give them. *Ex:* creating the CRPP

STRUGGLE

Protest Action: visible actions, they aim to publicly register a grievance with the authorities. *Ex:* satirical performances by the Moustache Brothers in Mandalay.

Non-Cooperation: people refuse to take part in activity, institution, regime which is to fight. *Ex:* Buddhists monks refused to accept donations from Burmese authorities in protest of harsh treatment of Buddhist monks by the military regime.

Non-Violent Intervention: actions that directly and physically disrupt the military organization and rule over the country. *Ex:* mass demonstrations as in 1988, 1996, 1998...

the people to organize them because challenging power requires education, information and strategy. Much of the time these actions remain invisible to outsiders, but they are the real bases of the movement, the promise of its longevity. They try to provide the people with the means to handle their own future: through meetings and discussions, by smuggling information in from outside the country, by opening libraries and schools and building parallel political institutions - for example the CRPP². This is seen in actions like wearing traditional costumes, commemorating events such as National Day or Martyr's Day (the anniversary of the assassination of General Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi, and hero of Burmese independence), and in prayer meetings for example.

"Struggle" means non-violent actions aimed specifically at the junta - they consist of challenging power directly, such as in the demonstrations of 1998 and 2003³. They express a shared feeling of dissatisfaction, a refusal to be dominated by the junta, a denial of the junta's phoney legitimacy. They are important in strengthening the movement because they are visible: they give people the opportunity to be free from fear. This proves there is a third way: a way between violence and resignation. But the biggest, most visible events are not always the most important for undermining the SPDC's power. If we look hard, we can see the struggle in such diverse actions as printing and distributing anti-government

literature, in every poster, in shouting slogans such as "Long live Aung San Suu Kyi," in wearing protest symbols on clothes, in the refusal to abide by the junta's unfair laws, and in every boycott. Even simply asking the junta to justify the crimes they perpetrate is part of the struggle showing them that they are not above the people. All these types of action represent the daily life of non-violent resistance groups. The reality is that there is not a single day that goes by without non-violent actions taking place inside the country.

There is no longer any time to speculate about it: the facts are known, the results will come. The movement inside Burma is organized and more active than we think. To know this is the first step towards supporting it. Believing it is already backing it.



Endnotes:

1 Information sources: Interview NISEA with Nay Rayne Kyaw, AAPP. January 2004

2 CRPP: Committee Representing the People's Parliament, created in September 1998, it replaces the national parliament that the SPDC refuses to recognize.

3 16 January 2003: Two nuns shouted slogans calling for authorities to lower the price of commodities such as rice and cooking oil, and handed out leaflets calling for progress in political dialogue between government and the NLD. (Amnesty International report, 1st November 2003)

news briefs

Suu Kyi To Be Freed? Aung San Suu Kyi is meeting envoys of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and may be freed as early as mid-April. The Burmese prime minister was considering freeing Aung San Suu Kyi during the annual Burmese water festival which falls from April 13 to April 16. UN special envoy Razali Ismael met earlier this month with the dissident and then separately with Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and later said both sides were willing to try and break the long political stalemate between them.

Burma-Indian trade may reach 1 billion \$: Burmese commerce Minister Pye Sone has said the bilateral trade between India and Burma may touch \$1billion by 2006. "The thrust on bilateral trade was the need of the hour instead of developing trade through third countries," he said at the opening ceremony of the "Made in India" show in Burma on March 2. "India and Burma as members of Bimstec

and the ASEAN bloc have immense opportunities to create free trade areas between the two countries."

US will maintain Burma sanctions: U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell suggested the U.S. market would remain closed to imports from Burma, whose military rulers have detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi for months. "I have seen no improvement in the situation," Powell told lawmakers, "We will continue to apply pressure and you can be sure that I will be looking at the sanctions issue very, very carefully with the same attitude I looked at it last year."

Thai government denies mass repatriation for economic reasons: Thailand has rejected allegations that it traded the lives of thousands of Burmese workers and asylum seekers for economic gains from the Burmese junta, saying the Kingdom needs to tighten regulations while conducting humanitarian work. A Thai Foreign

Ministry spokesman said the repatriation of illegal Burmese workers was the result of Thailand's policy to regulate foreign workers, and that "Burmese workers are needed and they are welcome to return to Thailand under a proper legal contract."

Burmese Army Attack KNU In Spite of Ceasefire Agreement: A senior KNU official reported that the Burma Army opened fire on a Karen military stronghold along the Thai-Burma border on the night of March 10th. The two sides reached a tentative ceasefire agreement in January. KNU officials confirmed that nobody was injured and that the base was not damaged. He also added that Karen troops did not return fire. The KNU also attacked a Burma Army outpost on February 23rd, hours before negotiations were due to begin between the two sides in Moulmein, Mon State.

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