Saffron Revolution

Two Friends in Action
Social Issues in Burma
My Experiences in “The Land of Evil” News Brief

“...corruption is endemic in Burma (and) the unfortunate part is our military government is greedy and only thinks of themselves and not their citizens, even using force to sustain their power over the populace.”

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It seems always the same: Some incident in Yangon or Mandalay sparks protests and demonstrations initially by students who are then joined by young monks. The demands and slogans focus upon some aspect of the incident – students or monks wronged, demonetization, price increases, or a similar legitimate grievance.

Local authorities warn the students and monks to stop their protest. Some protesters are then arrested. The protests enlarge and then spread to other cities and towns. More students and monks join the demonstrators. At this point, the demands and slogans escalate to political themes, typically democracy, free the political activists in jail or under house arrest, or eliminate the ruling regime. The ruling regime then issues warnings to the students and monks to halt the protests, and begins to move militias and army units into strategic positions, but holds them into place. They are waiting for the leaders of the demonstrations to publicly emerge. However, the military must act quickly to put down the protests once the key protest leaders are identified because of the fear that the protests will widen to include the active participation of the general public.

The leaders of the protests are identified and arrested. Militias and army units move in to breakup the protests - arresting, beating, and shooting people. After a few days, the protests and demonstrations are over. The initial grievance is not resolved; another generation of political activists is dead, in prisons, hiding, or escaped to Thailand. There are the usual official protests, and maybe sanctions, by the Western countries, a nonbinding condemnation by the United Nations, and a call by neighboring Asian countries (all with economic and political interests in Burma) for non interference in the internal affairs of Burma. With decades of experience, the military leaders pretty well have the routine down to a fine science about how to effectively deal with protests and demonstrations. Also they know that the threats by the Western countries will have little impact upon the country, since its main supporters – China, Thailand, Singapore, and other Asian countries – will take up the economic slack.

The protesters are generally Burmans, Buddhists, and from the cities and towns. Noticeably absent, in any great numbers, are people from the ethnic groups; the Muslims, Christians, and Hindus; or the religiously leaders from these communities. These are no coordinated actions by the non-ceasefire military groups (typically ethnic people), or by significant numbers of Buddhists or students in neighboring countries.
This is the constant Wheel of Suffering set into motion over and over again in Burma by the students and monks.

It is now 15 August 2007. The State Peace and Development Council suddenly removes the state subsidies on fuel causing a rapid and unannounced increase in prices. The fuel prices of government-supplied diesel and gasoline increase by almost 66% and the price of compressed natural gas for buses increases five-fold, all in less than a week. As a result, bus and taxi fares doubled almost immediately in the major cities. The impact upon the common people is disastrous with many of them unable to afford to take the bus to work. In line with these higher transportation costs, the prices for food and basic commodities also increase. While the prices for food and other commodities rose, wages have not increased.

In the background are the 88 Generation Students Group and the All Burma Monks Union. Over the past few years, they have met in small groups in the major cities, and across the border in Thailand, to ready themselves for an auspicious spark to again light the fire of protests and demonstrations for democracy and the removal of the military regime. The spark that set into motion the 2007 Wheel of Suffering was these price increases.

On 19 August, groups of people, led by the 88 Generation Students Group, stage a peaceful march in Yangon to protest the price increases. The government arrests and beats the demonstrators. Buddhist monks begin to protest the price increases in the streets of the major cities. The protests escalate and are soon joined by pro-democracy activists and local residents. In a matter of a few days, thousands of demonstrators are pouring into the streets across the country.

Then on 5 September, monks in Pakukku march and chant the “Metta Sutta” in sympathy with the plight of the people who were suffering from effects of the price increases. The local government militia attacks and beat the monks. It is reported that at least three monks are arrested and one monk is killed.

The next day, some monks in Pakukku briefly hold a group of government officials hostage to secure the release of the monks who were arrested during the previous day. They also demanded an apology from the government by 17 September. Should the government refuse to meet these demands, the monks would begin boycotting alms from military personnel - a turning over of the alms bowls which is an act of defiance by the monks that surfaced during the protests in 1990.

Then a few days later, an alliance of monks makes its own demands on the government:

- Apologize to the Pakukku monks by midnight of September 17;
- Reduce the prices of fuel oil and basic commodities;
- Unconditionally release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners; and
- Hold a dialogue with the democratic political opposition representatives in order to begin a national reconciliation process.

The monks say, that if this is not done by the deadline date, monks all across Burma will protest against the government. Here we see the escalation from the initial grievances of the prices increases and the affront to the Pakukku monks to political demands for the release of political prisoners and the initiation of a national reconciliation process. So far, we are still following the Wheel of Suffering script from the past as mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Also the monks feel that the military, being primarily Buddhist, will not attack them. This is a very surprising and unrealistic assumption given that the monks have been arrested, beaten, and killed during other protests in the
past. While the people and some military personnel do get angry about such actions against the monks, they are unable to do anything about it.

The deadline comes and goes without any apology from the military regime. The monks commence to march on 18 September and refuse alms from military personnel. This date is also the 19th anniversary of the military coup in 1988 which brought the military regime to power. Additionally, the numbers of the date form a series of “nines” – “1+8”, “09”, and “2+0+0+7” – and are considered as an auspicious sign.

Over the next week, the demonstrations grow in size and scope across the country. The Western countries voice their support. The demonstrations are now dubbed by the international press as the “Saffron Revolution” because of the concentration of Buddhist monks in the movement and the likeness of the protests to the “color revolutions” that earlier swept Serbia, the Ukraine, and Georgia.

The key protest leaders emerge and the protests begin to widen to include the general public. The government issues warnings and positions militia and military units at strategic locations around the key centers of protest. So far there are no surprises; the unfolding of events still fits the past scripts. The 2007 Wheel of Suffering continues turning and turning.

Then on 26 September, the military moves to arrest the protest leaders. Students, monks, and others are arrested, beaten and shot, and monasteries are raided. The crackdown by the military has begun. Over the ensuing days, the military methodically and brutally puts down the protest. Activists are hunted down, arrested, or killed; they try to hide or escape to Thailand. Within a few weeks, it is all over. The Western countries and the United Nations make their usual statements deploring the military repression of the demonstrators; some additional sanctions are imposed by the United States and the European Community. ASEAN and China urge dialogue.

The Wheel of Suffering has completed its turn again......same script......same result......more suffering for the people......a new generation of activists dead, in prison, in hiding or escaped to Thailand.

Where were the Muslims, Christians, and Hindus? Why were they not included?

Why were not actions coordinated with the non-ceasefire ethnic military groups?

Why did not the Buddhists monks in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, and other Buddhist countries come out in mass support and pressure their governments?

Why......?

Why......?

So many whys.....that turn the Wheel of Suffering with an axle of emotions, impatience, egos, and delusion. Why must the habitual Wheel of Suffering continue to be followed? Are there no lessons that have been learned over the many protests and demonstrations since 1962? The military regime has learned many lessons over the past fifty years and become more and more efficient in defeating the political activists. The regime has never been stronger than it is now. So why can not the political activists transform the Wheel of Suffering into a Wheel of Sharp Weapons – the sharp weapons of patience, wisdom, and skillful means to defeat the military regime? Emotions, impatience, egos, and delusion must be eliminated – they have produced brave martyrs, but have not alleviated the sufferings of the people....and have served as the axle to turn the Wheel of Suffering.

Divisions among the peoples must stop! Cannot one see that the military regime encourages and exploits these ethnic and religious differences? Also the groups must stop their greed for money, concessions, and power. Ending the suffering of the people and liberation from the military regime is more important!

The sharp weapons of patience and wisdom come from bringing leaders of all key groups together – the ethnic people and the religious denominations – to plan and implement the sharp weapon of skillful means to defeat the military regime.

A strategic assessment must be made of the capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, and other important aspects of the military regime, especially of its pillars of strength – USDA, police, military, businesses, China, Thailand, North Korea, Singapore, and others. The same assessment must be done with respect to the capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, and other important aspects of the opposition forces and various international communities – political, religious, social, and economic. The near term future must be examined for possible pending opportunities, threats, and problems. From this, a realistic desired future, free from the military regime, must be expounded.

Now the foundation is laid for the thoughtful and realistic formulation of a strategic plan of
Along the Thai-Burma border the rubbish dump of Mae Sot, Thailand has become a refuge for many migrant families from Burma. Approximately sixteen houses, constructed from bamboo and plastic materials currently exist at the rubbish dump. Living conditions are bleak for many families at Mae Sot’s rubbish dump with lack of access to basic needs and services, such as clean water and medical facilities.

In response, organizations such as the The Best Friend project have sought to transform the living conditions for many of the migrant families living at the rubbish dump. The Best Friend project started as a collaborative effort of two socially active monks from Burma. Growing up under the ruthless military regime and witnessing horrendous atrocities committed by Burma’s ruling government, Ashin Sopaka and “King Zero” set out to establish an organization that will provide a voice for people to communicate their struggles with world. Although primarily focused on education related initiatives, in 2007 the activities of The Best Friend project expanded to include work with people from Mae Sot’s Rubbish Dump.

The main role of The Best Friend project is to provide basic services to migrants living at the rubbish dump. Organizers supply medicine to individuals who cannot go into town for medical treatment and distribute food to families at the dumpsite. Organizers also provide opportunities for families at the rubbish dump to send their children to school, by linking them with local migrant schools in the surrounding Mae Sot area. Additionally, in cooperation with another organization, Peoples Partner for Development and Democracy (PPDD), organizers assist migrant families to relocate from the Rubbish Dump into better living situations.

The residents at the dump site are ethnically diverse from various regions inside Burma. Although coming from different backgrounds these individuals share common hardships of living in Burma. According to co-founder “King Zero” strategies with objectives; actions plans with goals, timelines, appropriate methods, responsible people, risks, and resources requirements to attack the strengths of the military regime and strengthen the capabilities of the opposition; contingency plans with trigger points; and, other important components. The strategic plan must then be implemented in a disciplined and proactive manner, and managed by a mindfulness and focused leadership to weaken the pillars of strength of the military regime.

The military regime must be cut off from its allies: political (China, Thailand, Singapore, ASEAN, and others), economic (domestic and foreign business interests), societal (USDA, Sangha, and others), and military/police. This is the Four Cuts Strategy of the opposition.

When the people see the real weakening of the military regime, a tipping point will be reached where liberation is in sight and the people will rally to bring it about.

This way of planning follows the Noble Eightfold Path beginning with Right View and ending with Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. The Buddha gave us this way to become liberated from suffering. Let us now use that way, with its Wheel of Sharp Weapons, to escape the habitual Wheel of Suffering.

These are the sharp weapons of patience, wisdom, and skillful means to defeat the military regime, liberate all the peoples of Burma from suffering, and restore honor to the military of Bogyoke Aung San. Make this our strong desire and cause!
“Many people inside Burma do not earn sufficient income to meet the basic needs for their survival. Even though individuals work long and arduous hours, often times from dawn to dusk, they receive as little as 1 U.S. dollar in return, which is not nearly enough money for workers to support themselves and their families. The lack of opportunities and long working hours with little compensation in exchange has forced many individuals and families to flee Burma with the hope of better life opportunities in neighbouring Thailand.

Although the length of stay varies among migrant families at the rubbish dump, typically families stay anywhere from 6 months to one year. According to co-founder “King Zero” the people at the dumpsite do not choose to live at the dumpsite because of the poor living conditions and high susceptibility to disease, yet unfortunately many individuals and families find themselves living on rubbish because of their limited social network connections in Thailand. When many people leave Burma they often arrive in Thailand with very little contact to other social groups that could assist them in finding suitable homes and work. The combination of not knowing how to connect with the right social network and or the fear of doing so due to their illegal status severely limits options and forces many people to resort to living at the rubbish dump.

Although the rubbish dump is not a healthy environment for inhabitance the site does provide people living there the opportunity to earn a greater wage than in Burma. Workers at the site can earn roughly 100 baht (3 U.S. dollars) by collecting recyclable materials at the rubbish dump. The collected recyclables are often sold to local shops in Mae Sot and just over the border in Myawaddy, Burma.

Aside from health risks, migrant workers also face the threat of arrest from Thai authorities. According to “King Zero”, Thai police raid the rubbish dump sometimes one or two times a month to arrest and deport illegal Burmese migrants living at the site. Oftentimes illegal migrants have to flee to neighboring forests and hide or bribe police officials in order to avoid deportation back to Burma. In the case of migrant families deported to the Myawaddy, many migrants stay inside Burma temporarily until sufficient time has passed and it is safe for them to illegally cross again into Thailand and return to the rubbish dump. According to “King Zero”, migrant families return to the rubbish dump due to the greater opportunities they find there in comparison to their hometowns in Burma.

Since the inception of The Best friend work with the people of the Mae Sot rubbish dump, the organization has seen some success. Most recently, organizers raised enough money to construct thicker roofs for families at the rubbish dump. In total, fourteen families received new roofs to withstand exposure from the weather conditions. Relying primarily on individual donations, organizers of The Best friend hope to continue their current initiatives with the migrant families living at the rubbish dump as well as expand their activities with the construction of a well to provide clean water.

Rubbish Dump
Profile: Mia Thein

Mia Thein is 29 and has lived and worked on the rubbish dump in Mae Sot for more than ten years. During that time she has only returned to her home village in Burma twice. Mia Thein is five months pregnant with her second child, yet she still works in the rubbish dump picking through the piles of refuse and bagging up similar items. She typically earns between 85 – 90 Baht from selling the rubbish on to factory owners, who then recycle the plastic cups or glass bottles into items they can sell. Mia Thein’s husband works outside the dump taking jobs on a daily basis, sometimes farming or in factories. He usually earns between 70 – 80 Baht per day. The family’s food costs are in the region of 50 – 60 Baht per day. Mia Thein explains that this could be substantially lower if they could buy staples like rice in bulk, but that since food is often taken by police when the dump is raided they can only afford to buy food on a daily basis. Similarly the police have frequently taken and sold on the bags of rubbish collected by Mia Thein and the people she works with, so
they usually carry the huge sacks of refuse around with them at all times.

Mia Thein and her family face arrest on a regular basis. Two months ago she and her sister, brother and mother were arrested by the police. They were taken back across the border to Burma, where they had to pay 400 Baht each to the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (which has been closely allied with the Burmese Army since 1994), who then let them back into Thailand. Her and her family therefore save any leftover money for paying bribes and costs incurred by arrest and deportation.

Profile: Wat Tut

Wat Tut earns around 100 – 120 Baht per day by collecting rubbish to sell, and has to feed himself and his wife and 3 children with that money. Wat Tut says that beer cans and plastic cups used to earn 40 Baht per kilo a few years ago, but that the price has dropped to only 20 Baht per kilo recently, making life even harder for the rubbish workers. Many more Burmese migrants have moved into the dump in the past couple of years. Wat Tut says that he understands this, because although he cannot save any money from working in the dump, at least he and family are not starving in Burma. He says: “There is no work in Burma. Living in the rubbish dump is preferable to living in Burma.” He would not want to move into a refugee camp because he wants to work and support his family. This is often the reason why people stay in the dump. People live, marry, give birth, bring children up and die in the dump. Generations of families live there.

There is even a dump school, the ‘Skyblue School’, which Wat Tut’s children attend. Not all children go to school regularly because they are sometimes needed at home to take care of their younger siblings while their parents work, or are sent out to work themselves. If parents have more than one older child the siblings often share the responsibility of work or babysitting, and will attend school on a rotational basis.

When asked about the fear of arrest, Wat Tut tells us that the police come in the middle of the night or the early morning to arrest people, and so they can take the rubbish bags stacked outside the worker’s houses. Wat Tut says that workers don’t dare to sleep, and are always keeping watch for the police. If the police drive to the dump following a rubbish truck, the workers can run and hide, but if they surprise them in the night then they can always catch people or receive bribes.

Wat Tut tells us that this year there has been a noticeable decrease in foreign aid like food, blankets and plastic sheeting to help the dump workers reinforce their homes against the weather. They have had some support, but it had been very marginal.

For more information: www.thebestfriend.org
The lands of the Karen people have been called “Kawthoolei – the land without evil”. But this has sadly changed. The Burmese army has repeatedly attacked us with guns, artillery, and aircraft; they have relocated our villages, destroyed and stolen our animals, crops, and possessions; they have raped, beaten, and killed us; and they have forced us into refugee camps in other countries. The Burmese army has turned our precious Kawthoolei into “the land of evil”.

There are thousands of people and more than ten villages in the Saw Mu Plaw village tract; yet there are few people who can record their experiences as they are unable to read or write. I want to speak for many of them through my story…the story of my experiences in “the land of evil”.

My name is Tamaw Karo, but in school my friends called me Saw Htway. I lived in Ka Bu Khee village (Saw Mu Plaw village tract, Lu Thaw Township, and Mutraw (Papun) District) in Karen State. I was born on the 15th of December 1983, but not in the village because my family had been forced to flee a Burmese army operation. Then the army set up a base nearby.

When I was eight years old, I remember being really happy when our family was forced to flee from a Burmese army operation. My mother carried me on her back, and I was able to get milk to drink and good food to eat. I look back on this with sadness at my happiness at that time when my family was in so much distress.

When I became of school age, I really felt very bored in school and hated going there. I loved to fish in the paddy fields and hunt for birds in the bushes. I much preferred to do those things than go to school. During this period, people believed that you would still be able to get food to eat whether you were literate or not. So I paid little mind to go to school to become educated.

Also at this time, my father wanted me to work and stay with him in the paddy field. I had to take care of the buffalos and do other work for him. But worst of all, I was forced to live in the paddy field hut. I was always crying because I missed my mother and had no friends to play with. I got lots of mosquito bites when I was taking care of the buffalos and was scared to live in the jungle. After living like this for awhile, I changed my mind about school and entered Saw Mu Plaw middle school in 1992. Going to school seemed much better to me than living in the paddy field!

I began to enjoy going to school, but I was forced to flee Burmese army operations all the time. Worse than that, the Burmese army repeatedly shelled our village with artillery and shot at us with machineguns during the day and at night. They also used aircraft to bombard our village. These attacks caused so many problems for the villagers.

Then one day I became very lucky when my brother-in-law gave me four goats to raise and sell. After awhile, I had more and more goats. I looked after the goats with my cousin and as they grew bigger, I sold them and shared the money with my cousin. When we got even more goats, we shared the goats, but sold them sepa-
rately. I felt very proud raising and selling so many goats, and I had no worries or problems about paying my school fees. People began to call me “the rich man of the goats”. I was very happy, yet angry at the same time, because I had never heard of anyone being called “the rich man of the goats”. Also I took care of the buffalos every afternoon after school. During the weekends, I had to take the buffalos to a place quite far away from my village.

Whenever I visited my father at the paddy field, I acted like the visitor because I did not like to live in the paddy field hut and wanted to live in my village at Saw Mu Plaw. More than that, I did not want to stay at the paddy field hut because my father would ask me to work hard and was always scolding me. I don’t like it when people scold me and I do not like to scold other people.

One day in April 1997 when I went to our paddy field hut and was cooking my meal, I suddenly heard the sounds of gunfire, both machineguns and artillery. My father, uncle, aunt and brother had already heard the gunfire. They immediately gathered up our belongings and hid them in the jungle. I then ran from the hut to another place called Ta Kah Ta. I was very happy to meet my brother there. He told me that our other brother, Pa Oo, had become injured and, that he and I would have to take care of him at the Na Yaw Ta Clinic. I had to take care of him until the end of April.

The Burmese army from Ler Mu Plaw then retreated from Saw Mu Plaw, but they were still were shooting their guns everywhere they went. When I went back to my village at Saw Mu Plaw, I saw my goats’ shits, but not my goats. They were all lost. The Burmese army shot and killed twenty-eight of my grandparents’ buffalos, leaving only two buffalos for them.

From the time I was born until 1997, the Burmese army had burned down our house four times and worse than that, they had burned down three of our rice stores. In 2004 when I visited my village at Saw Mu Plaw, it had become part of the jungle and a den for wild animals.

Later in May 1997, the Burmese army came again and we had to hide in the jungle for the whole year. This time I was only able to take one blanket and used it every night: sometimes on the ground and other times, in the trees and the huts. It eventually became as hard as a mattress. When I was finally able to wash my blanket in the Theh Lo River, all the fish cried as they had to suffer the smell of my blanket! The fish were crying as if they were falling into hell!

In 1998, I went to study at the Tha Dah Der school. I became sick at least twice a week and could not keep up with the lessons anymore. Also I was beaten by the teachers. Finally after three months, I said goodbye to the school and did not return. I would have died if I had continued my studies at this school because of my sickness.

Although I was still sick, I went back and stayed with my parents who were now living in Lu Thaw Township and helped them in any work I was able to do. I said to myself that if I continue to have health problem like this, I would have to die if my parent were to pass away and not be there to help me. Sometimes I thought about going back to school for my studies, but my cousins would laugh at me because I was becoming too old to continue my studies. Yet I thought to myself that when I grow older, my brain will work better. I understand that in foreign countries, people study until they die. I think we have to learn from this too.

From my memories of the years from 1997 to 2009, I was aware of about hundred people who had died or were injured from landmines
because of the Burmese army’s offensives. This includes my brother-in-law Kya Yu Mo and uncle Mu Ya Pa.

My brother Pa Oo was shot and wounded. The bullet entered his neck and came out in his mouth. As result, he lost two of his teeth. Quite a lot of villagers were shot and killed by the Burmese army, and I had to bury many of them by myself. All the villagers from Saw Mu Plaw had to face death, sickness, food scarcity and tears; and, this suffering has still not come to an end. What kind of freedom did the British give to Burma, especially to the ethnic people who helped them fight against the Japanese? An independence of death and suffering!!

In 2001, I went with a friend to continue my studies at the Ban Sala refugee camp in Thailand. I had trouble following the lessons because I had stopped school four years earlier and was moved up a class. During every examination period, I only passed the Karen language course. The headmaster said to me, “What use are you? You only passed one subject!” I told him, “I don’t know,” and then everybody laughed at me as if they were watching a comedy film. However when I first came back to school, I was very delighted to see young girls with the school uniforms. I thought to myself that it would be very good if one of them became my girl friend!

I really liked living in the refugee camp since I was able to eat good food - sometimes with beans, and other times with fish paste and oil. Thus we never needed to complain to the Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) for food or other personal things. Whenever the camp section leaders came and told us that it was time to go and take rations, many people really liked it. It was just like someone shouting and saying to the Christians that “Jesus Christ is coming back”! From then on, I started enjoying the good taste of life.

When I finished Grade Eight, I went home to visit my parents and relatives. I was really shocked when I first saw them because I thought that my grandparents had just come back from the hell since their faces looked like the papaya salad. Yet I was still very happy to see them again.

In 2006, I visited all of them again. At that time, I asked them for two thousand baht. Even though they had very little money, they offered me three thousand five hundred baht and said to me, “Son, study hard and don’t be lazy!” I felt bad about taking their money as their life was much more difficult than my life. Also I was growing older and already studying at high school. So I went back to the camp with empty hands.

I finished high school in 2006 and went to further my studies at the Karen Northern Further Education Programme (KNFEP) school at Pway Baw Lu. I had hoped that my studies would become much easier and I would have some time to relax. That did not happen. The English language course was really hard and it was a difficult challenge for me. The food was good enough for me. However during the second year, decent food became scarce and sometimes we had to steal food from each other. The major donor from Norway stop giving support to the school and funding was received only from some private donors.

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**Social Issues in Burma**

*By Casey Williams*

**W**hy! I am a person who was growing up to be in this country I didn’t know myself that is really terrible one in the world, it calls Burma.” This statement is from a young boy living along the Thai-Burma border. Although the boy may think he is suffering alone, all ages living in Burma endure similar fates as this little boy. While listening to the little boys’ comment, I reflected on my personal experiences growing up in Burma.

Burma (recently renamed Myanmar) could potentially be one of the richest countries in the world. The natural resources are enormous with natural gas, oil, tin, coal, silver, gold, gems, large teak forests, fertile rice fields just to mention a few at the country disposal.

For the past ten years ago I lived in a small village in the eastern region of the Karen state. I come from a poor family and our lives are difficult because of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government who command every aspect of our community. Growing up in Burma, I could see obviously the living standards of most poor people were bleak, with no economic and educational opportunities or any chance to get involved in politics. The few
families who could afford to send their to further their education (i.e. college or university) faced the difficulty of distance, with schools too far away from our village and government blockades by the SPDC regime.

Life opportunities are very much determined by the wealth of your family. The lifestyle of the upper class is very different from the lower class, as the wealthy elite owned cars, businesses and controlled economy of our village. Their children could attend higher education and the parents of this class can also hire professional to tutor their children for educational excellence. I noticed that the upper class people were usually the military government’s relatives whom are powerful in Burma. When I young I believed that if we had money we would be able to do accomplish everything we wanted in life.

In order to understand the social issues of Burma, you have to understand the social structure of society. Many of the state-owned businesses were privatized and businesses became properties of the military officials and some well-to-do people. Civil servants, farmers and workers are from the lower social classes, whose salary is barely enough to live day-to-day.

I remember back in 1999 when the situation changed for many people in Burma as the government increased salary for the people because the costs of living had increased. As I stated earlier, employees working for the government had insufficient income for basic needs. Although this was a small achievement for people corruption is endemic in Burma. Many economic and business analysts consider corruption the most serious barrier to investment and commerce in Burma. The unfortunate part is our military government is greedy and only thinks of themselves and not their citizens, even using force to sustain their power over the populace.

One of the sector’s where corruption is apparent is in agriculture. According to the opposition National League for Democracy party, in lending money to people in Burma, the government’s agricultural bank officials skim money from loans to farmers and use it in their own personal endeavors. The corruption from the top is always felt by the people on the ground, especially the farmers in Burma who struggle to provide enough daily food for their families. In attempts to compensate for insufficient income, some people borrow money from rich people, however because the interest is so high many people cannot afford to pay back the debt and often lose their homes, fields and other assets they may own. Eventually, many of these debtors become homeless due to their economic problems. In my opinion, if the workers in Burma have jobs and earn sufficient then their survival is guarantee. Everyday in Burma the cost of living rises and workers do not earn enough for their families. The plight of the average person in Burma is shown everyday in the news as reporters declare Burma a developing country with the majority of the population suffering from poverty. Therefore, we need a new country and a new government in Burma that adheres to peace and justice.

In writing this article, I feel lighter because I can tell outsiders the difficult situation we face inside Burma. The military government controls everything and they do not want to give their nation a chance for social, economic, education and political opportunities. Although discussing sensitive topics to the state, such as social issues and corruption is dangerous, I find it therapeutic and if I have a chance I would like to write again for my nation and my community.

“...corruption is endemic in Burma (and) the unfortunate part is our military government is greedy and only thinks of themselves and not their citizens, even using force to sustain their power over the populace.”
**News Brief**

Due to a lack of adequate knowledge about the dangers of sharing needles, thousands of injecting drug users are being infected with HIV in Burma. According to UNAIDS, one in three injecting drug users is infected with HIV/AIDS in Burma, where an estimated 240,000 people are thought to be living with the deadly disease.

Government figures also show that HIV prevalence is at about 35 percent among injecting drug users; in some areas, the rate is as high as 80 percent. Intravenous drug use accounts for 30 percent of all new HIV infections in this country, which is the world’s second-largest producer of illicit opium and one of the largest producers of amphetamine type stimulants (ATS). Experts say that the number of drug users has also increased at a surprising rate in recent years, and that many users are moving away from smoking opium to injecting heroin and taking ATS tablets.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that there are around 300,000 drug users in Burma, while some NGOs believe there could be as many as 500,000.

An estimated 50 percent of all drug users are reportedly injecting drug users, according to experts. In an effort to reduce HIV infection caused by needle-sharing, international and local agencies have been trying to raise HIV awareness among injecting drug users. Through awareness-raising campaigns, some injecting drug users know that they should not share a needle with other users in order to avoid becoming infected with HIV. Some drug users say that one reason they tend to reuse needles is that they fear being arrested by the police when they buy new needles from drug stores.

The 1993 Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Law require drug users to register with government medical facilities to have treatment and rehabilitation. If they fail to register, they could be imprisoned for three to five years.

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We would like to ask our readers to kindly notify us of any changes to your mailing address. You can inform us at burmaissues@burmaissues.org

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