Burma Issues

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No pages are labeled 3, 5, or 7.

Page 2  The Environment as a Tool of War
Page 4  Myanmar’s Expenditures on the Military, Health and Education
Page 6  Speaking Truth Takes Courage
Page 8  September! News

INFORMATION FOR ACTION  CAMPAIGNS FOR PEACE  GRASSROOTS EDUCATION AND ORGANIZING
THE ENVIRONMENT AS A TOOL OF WAR

Burma had one of the most enviable ecosystems in south-east Asia, a rich and diverse mixture that went largely unspoilt while the rest of the Asian region abused and plundered there’s. Having housed this rich and diverse ecosystem untouched for so long, Burma is now experiencing the fast track to degradation of its natural resources, plundered and destroyed in large part by the military regime. Since the current regime came to power in 1988 the rate of deforestation in Burma has more than doubled, in Karenni state alone over 60% of the forest has been logged.

This destruction can be attributed to many different factors, all inter-related and all causing devastating repercussions on the state of Burma and its people. The following, by no means an extensive discussion, are some of the more prominent effects on the environment and its inhabitants.

FEEDING OPPRESSION

The environments resources have been a productive tool for the military in the oppression of its own people. Burma’s natural resources have long provided the military with the income needed to prop up their regime; this means providing, building and strengthening the army that then goes out and enacts suppressive measures on the people to ensure longevity in their position of power.

The ruling military has created many high profile partnerships with foreign companies to carry out these plans. These huge foreign invested construction projects reinforce some of the root causes that enable the military to maintain its power over the people. The abuses that result from these projects compound a “climate of fear”, one of the pillars that allow the military to maintain its position of power. It’s a common scenario: the project is initiated and constructed by the regime to create the income to prop up their position of power and legitimacy. A result of these projects is the human rights abuses: forced labour, portering, relocations and killings. The result of these abuses feeds a climate of fear, oppression and an inability to act against the perpetrator. Burma Issues interviewed a villager who lived in the area of the Law Pi Ta power station in Karenni State, he put it like this: “We had to work all the time, dig the hole, build the houses and fences. Because it is very difficult to survive there, my family fled to the border in 1995. When moving from place to place we lost many things, house, lands, farms, cattle”.

SACRIFICING THE PEOPLE

The human rights abuses that have occurred due to these projects have been amply documented. The military have cut off and displaced many villages in their attempts to install these projects, often with the knowledge of those foreign companies who are investing in the projects. The Yadana gas pipeline, whose construction was completed in 1996, is perhaps one of the more prominent cases. UNOCAL, the American company responsible for this pipeline is currently embroiled in court proceedings in America over their involvement in the human rights abuses that occurred during and after the construction of this pipeline. Its importance rests in highlighting that foreign companies can be held accountable for their involvement with authoritarian governments and their abuse of their own people.

The immediate repercussions of such events are often felt mostly by the people whose homes and lives are being destroyed by these projects. Forcible removal, destruction of food sources, forced labour and the deaths of villagers are common results of such projects. Law pi Ta power station was built by the Japanese after the Second World War as an appeasement gift for the atrocities committed by the Japanese on the Karenni people. In 2001 talks started to circulate about plans to repair the station with a (US) $29 million grant from the Japanese government. The electricity generated from this power station has given little benefit to the Karenni people, most of it being directed to the larger central areas of Burma. The cost of these repairs is felt most acutely

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by the Karenni people in the vicinity of the power station. The military sent in troops to secure the area, using the villagers as forced labour to construct their military camps and destroying the environment in the process. They demanded food from the villages and they littered the area around their camps with landmines, killing and maiming villagers and cattle. A woman interviewed by Burma Issues said, “I don’t think people will be getting the benefit from the help of the Japanese government for 29 million dollars. It will be just for the military government to improve their security”.

Another woman also interviewed worked closely with the project, “I don’t agree with the plan because I know very well where the money will go. It will not benefit for the people but will hurt the local people. It’s not the right time to help Burma. I can say that they will plant more and more landmines. They will use the local people as forced labour and they will move the villages which are near the power station”. The villagers are often the first sacrificed as the military consolidates its position of power by enacting a series of oppressive measures upon the very people such constructions as this should be benefiting.

Repercussions for the Environment

The act of warfare itself provides a constant abuse on the wear and tear of the environment. The constant bombardment of artillery and the construction of trenches and military camps has a huge impact on disturbing and destroying an already fragile environment. Wasteful logging and mass construction projects have caused soil erosion, sedimentation of rivers, flooding and dry season water shortages.

In 1998 the Karenni National Women Organisation reported 115 deaths in Loikaw Hospital from contact with contaminated water. Mass forest clearing has caused many rivers and lakes to run dry. A friend of Burma Issues compares his home in Karenni state to 10 years ago. He says the changes are startling. Whole mountains have been cleared of trees and vegetation and a lake near his home that had formerly been one of the larger in Karenni state, now stands dry. “In the past ten years alone there has been huge changes, imagine what the future holds”.

Maw Chi Mine in Karenni state was formerly owned by the Karenni people, during the Second World War it was occupied by the Japanese and today it is controlled by the SPDC. The shafts of this mine were built from timber incuring huge deforestation for the construction of the mine. Due to this clearance of the trees, rivers have become polluted and run dry; the area is also experiencing extended drought seasons. Disposal of chemical waste from the mine was pushed directly into the water sources, causing them to run a black oily colour and killing people and wildlife in the process. The manager of the mine was quoted as admitting these abuses, “We dispose of chemical wastes in a river near the factory. I know that it is not ethical to do this”.

The Economy of the Future

Burma is essentially an agriculture-based economy. Its natural resources and the environment generate a lot of its income, but it’s a resource that is fast running out. In Karenni state huge tracts of forest have been cleared for the logging business, it’s a lucrative business and a corrupt one. Seventy percent of Thailand’s illegal imports come from the logging business within Burma. It is a cross border business in which Thailand actively participates and encourages. It generates (US) $112 million a year and covers 18,000sq km’s of land. The rate of deforestation has been so rapid that no thought of maintaining sustainability nor creating structures to replace the deforestation have been mentioned. In terms of the future they cannot possibly replace that which they are removing and in terms of the present they are destroying the habitats of countless wildlife and doing irreparable damage to Burma’s ecosystems.

The long-term repercussions on the environ-
MYANMAR’S EXPENDITURES ON THE MILITARY,
HEALTH AND EDUCATION

This is an excerpt from a report by Nonviolence International entitled, “Myanmar’s Expenditures on the Military, Health and Education, produced in August 2002. To see this report in its entirety, including footnotes please visit the nonviolence international website at www.nonviolenceinternational.net or e-mail them at ahimsa@ksc.th.com

MILITARY EXPENDITURE IN MYANMAR

It is difficult to know the exact amount of military expenditure in Myanmar due to a lack of transparency in accounting and to unclear definition of expenditures. "Failures in...comprehensive disclosure of the underlying methods and concepts, and a general lack of transparency have led to doubts on the accuracy of official statistics" in some countries in Asia, the World Bank reported. ¹ There is a speculation that the SPDC doesn’t include all defence expenditure in its official budget and uses other budget sources for military related purposes. Also, the SPDC is known to have maneuvered some statistics out of necessity. ²

Different organisations have different figures for Myanmar’s military expenditure. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in the United Kingdom, Myanmar’s defence expenditure is as high as US$2.0 billion in 1999 and maintains the 4th biggest expenditure on the military of all countries in ASEAN in 1998. The survey by SIPRI gives a higher figure as US$2.9 billion, ranking Myanmar as the second highest in ASEAN countries in 1999.³ Nonetheless, the SPDC’s quantative amount of military expenditure is not very high in global terms due to its weak economy. Global military expenditure is gradually increasing on coming into the 21st century when more countries acquire sophisticated, thus expensive, weapons. ⁴ Within the country, indicators on the states’ military power commonly point out Myanmar’s prioritised development of militarisation.

Since seizing power in 1988, Myanmar’s ruling junta has systematically sought to increase both the size of its standing army, and to modernise the weapons at their command.⁵ Over the past ten years, the number of personnel in the Tatmadaw (Armed Forces) has increased 242 percent, from 186,000 in 1988 to 450,000 in 1999, the highest per-capita rate in the world.⁶ The IISS places the number of men under arms at 467,700 when both Burmese armed forces and insurgents are combined.

THE CHOICE: INDUSTRIAL OR MILITARY DEVELOPMENT?

Myanmar’s industrial potential remains underdeveloped, despite SPDC’s stated intention to boost economic growth through industrial development. The Ka Pa Sa, or Myanmar Defence Products Industry is believed by one foreign embassy in Yangon to be the prime growing economic sectors in Myanmar.⁷ The Ka Pa Sa was developed with the help of the German state-owned company Fritz Werner GmbH (The German government enjoyed 80% of benefits until 1990 when it cut ties with the company).⁸

Myanmar manufactures small arms at several assembly factories, including the one designed by state-owned Chartered Industries of Singapore (CIS) in 1997.⁹ By international cooperation, Myanmar now has the capability to create weapons that require higher technology than they could previously have produced in their indigenous factories.¹⁰ By this way, the Ka Pa Sa now is able to manufacture: assault rifles, light machine guns, ammunition of several types, grenades, anti-personnel landmines, mortar bombs, mobile artillery rocket systems, small naval vessels and light armoured vehicles.¹¹ The same countries helping build Myanmar’s arms industries are also, unsurprisingly, its chief suppliers of ready-made arms.¹² With ongoing support from those countries, the Tatmadaw will predictably become one of the better-equipped military forces in Southeast Asia.¹³ Behind rapid military development stand neglected and deteriorating social services. Myanmar’s military expansion comes at the cost of ordinary people’s health and education.
HEALTH AND EDUCATION IN MYANMAR

Myanmar is investing far more resources into military development than in healthcare or education. Myanmar’s annual health expenditure accounts for only 3.5% of the purchase of ten MIG-29 fighter aircrafts from Russia, which requires it to pay an initial US$39 million. Myanmar’s share of military expenditure in comparison with health and education, is larger than any other ASEAN nation.

Myanmar’s health care system has been devastated by this neglect and impoverishment. The United Nations Development Program reported that the SPDC’s public expenditure on health as of GDP is the lowest among 131 listed countries where data is available. The junta’s annual health expenditure in 1995-1996 was estimated as only 6.9 kyats per capita. The World Health Report 2000 ranked Myanmar 190th out of 191 countries in overall effectiveness of its health care system.

Health services by non-state groups are increasing as a direct result of the lack of public health expenditure. This growth in private healthcare is, however, limited primarily to urban areas and is not well regulated. The general population suffers not only from lack of availability of health care, but also overpay for poor quality of service when they can afford to do so. While Non-Governmental Organisations in neighbouring countries have played important roles in helping local health authorities develop the public health system, Myanmar has received minimal benefit from non-governmental services, due to restrictions on growth of civil society and on international NGOs imposed by SPDC, as well as international condemnation or boycott of the current ruling authority.

The negligence of the health care system has resulted in a high rate of death in children from preventable diseases such as malaria and malnutrition. Failure to address the spread of HIV has resulted in the disease reaching at least 2% of all the adult population. Unlike other high-HIV prevalence countries in the region, Cambodia and Thailand which have attempted to implement national prevention programs, HIV prevalence rate is not believed to have reached its peak in Myanmar.

As a result of international criticism against the closure of the universities for several years in the mid-90’s by the junta, some 20 higher education facilities were re-opened in the country. However, these in most situations are open only a few months out of the year and facilities are reported to be of poor quality.

Youth unable to get a standard education are vulnerable to be conscripted. The Tatmadaw are allegedly recruiting children, under eighteen years old, in order to expand the size of its standing army. Myanmar has one of the highest numbers of child soldiers in the world, according to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Whether children of Burman or other ethnic groups, the only type of education now available in Myanmar for too many youth is military training.

MYANMAR AFTER PEACE...

The military junta’s emphasis on military expansion, at the sacrifice of health and education will have a long term effect on its society, even after the internal conflicts are ended, and the system of governance changes.

Current arms production in Myanmar is totally consumed by its expanding military. Once intensive conflict ceases and any future government decides to downsize the military, weapons consumed by the Tatmadaw will begin seeping into ordinary society, or be exported to other troubled countries. The South African, El Salvador and Cambodian experiences show that great numbers of weapons stored in the national arsenals disappear through theft, negligence or corruption of officials ending up in civilian or criminal hands during the post conflict period. Studies by the International Committee of the Red Cross and others have illustrated that the high availability of weapons increases crime rate in societies after wars.

In the post conflict period, the former emphasis on developing Myanmar’s arms industry will either cause serious unemployment or force a future government to become a merchant of death, since the highly developed arms and weapons industry could be seen as too valuable a resource for the government to abandon, and hence, shall continue to produce arms.

Today’s lack of attention to education and health produces sorrow and prohibits people from having productive and enjoyable lives. In a post war environment, as many African countries demonstrate, ex-combatants including child soldiers, have difficulty reintegrating into the society. Those who have lost a part of the body will suffer from the deprivation of a livelihood as well as loss of capacity in daily activity and of social status.

CONCLUSION

Neither guns, landmines nor high-technological weapons have brought peace and development to Myanmar. Current policies have not only neglected human needs today, but may even be depriving the people of Myanmar of a future worth living.
On 29 November 2001 Salai Tun Than, PhD, appeared in front of Rangoon Town Hall in his academic gown. There he began handing out a personal petition calling for multi-party elections within one year under an interim civilian government. His petition urged the military government to kill him if unwilling to meet his demands as “it is better to die than live under the military regime”. Within minutes he was taken away by members of the security forces. He was later sentenced to seven years in prison.

Protesting Burma’s one-party military government has long been a very sensitive activity. Since the military coup of General Ne Win in 1962, many students, monks, farmers, workers and academics have ended up in prison by speaking out too loudly or too directly about their dislike for military rule. Burma’s prisons are full, and a good many of the prisoners are political prisoners, meaning that they are people who challenge the military regime’s right to maintain control over the country and the people.

In the past year and a half, more than 240 political prisoners have been released, but as many as 2,000 more remain locked up and new ones, like Salai Tun Than, are still being arrested. Following Aung San Suu Kyi’s release from house arrest in May of this year, the people of Burma waited with hope that the remaining political prisoners would finally walk out of the prisons and life in the country would become more free, but until now only a handful of prisoners have been ceremonially released. It is clear that the military regime remains fearful of those who raise a voice against them, and that perhaps uncovers one of the regime’s weaknesses that could be utilised by the population to further destablise their seemingly iron grip on the country. But to utilise this weakness requires tremendous courage - courage that only a few in the academic, religious and middle class have been able to muster. At seventy four, Salai Tun Than is one of those few persons coming from a potentially safe class who has exhibited the kind of courage that makes the military shudder.

Born in 1928, Salai Tun Than is a Chin by ethnicity. He received his Bachelor of Science (Agriculture) from the University of Rangoon in 1953 and then travelled to Georgia, USA where he received his Master of Science Sigma Xi (Agronomy) from the University of Georgia in 1955 and later his PhD (Crop Nutrition) from the University of Wisconsin in 1959. He was very active in both academic and national roles, serving in the Chin Defence Organisation from 1948-49, as Commanding Officer of the Mandalay University Training Corps, (1970-75) and Secretary of the Burma Socialist Programme Party of Pyinmana Township. After retirement, Salai Tun Than could have lived in relative comfort had he not been so bothered by the devastation the ruling military junta was bringing to his country and his people. So why did he choose to speak out when so many remain silenced by their fears? Only when he is freed from prison and once again can speak for himself will we know for certain, but for now perhaps we can speculate a little.

The problem in Burma is not simply a problem of one party rule, but more so how that one party rules. Any regime that does not have the support of the people must resort to instilling terror in the people in order to try and prevent them from rising up in rebellion. The Burmese military junta is no exception. The presence of foreign visitors and investors may limit their fear tactics in a few of the urban centers, but in the distant reaches of the country where no international eyes and ears are present, the military carries out their fear campaigns with impunity, and they do it with a vengeance.

A January 2002 UN Commission on Human Rights report estimates that there are between 600,000 thousand and one million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the rural areas of Burma (http://www.db.idpproject.org/). The military creates IDPs by burning crops and villages, raping women, randomly killing men, women and children, and by using villagers as forced labor and porters. To escape this form of torture, villagers either seek refuge in neighbouring countries where they are often treated with further disdain, or they flee deep into the jungles to hide. There they survive on only what they can scavenge from the forests and streams. They have no access to health care, education, food aid or the protection of international agencies. Even while in hiding, they are hunted down like animals, and so must continually be fleeing approaching military troops.
and seeking new safe havens.

According to the UN report mentioned above, there are now approximately 300,000 IDPs in the North-eastern Shan State, 100,000-200,000 in Karen State, 70,000-80,000 in Karenni State, 60,000-70,000 in Mon State and 100,000 in Rakhine State. The actual figures could be much higher. The situation of these IDPs is deplorable and has gone on far too long without proper international attention. Like a tree falling in the forest when no one is there to hear it, the cries of these IDPs remain silent as the world focuses on urban political issues rather than opening up their ears to the reality in the rural areas of Burma. Silence in this kind of situation is tacit support for the military, and to attempt to carry on life in some form of normalcy, or for NGOs to carry out their work without speaking loudly and with determination against these crimes against humanity is inexcusable.

It is people like Salai Tun Than, those who realise that their own safety and comfort mean nothing while so many people continue to be treated in such subhuman ways, that garner the courage needed to take a stand. They are the true prophets of our day and most clearly reflect the words of a Greek historian by the name of Thucydides who said, “Justice will not come...until those who are not injured are just as indignant as those who are.” Through those who become truly indignant when others suffer, the cries of the IDPs gain the sound needed to be carried around the world. They help break the silence that so effectively feeds the military machine’s power over the people.

There are those who may believe that Salai Tun Than was misled in his attempt to speak out, for after all now he is in prison and unable to speak any more. The military also perhaps thinks that they have silenced truth by assigning him to a torturous life behind bars. But Salai Tun Than’s voice and the cries of the IDPs is only silenced if no others exhibit the courage to raise the voice of truth. Burma’s prisons can hold only so many people and the military regime can control only so many international NGOs. Truth does in the end win, but its victory comes quicker if more and more people challenge the military with open and courageous determination in order to make that truth heard.

The movement toward justice gains its power from the voice of truth, and the IDPs of Burma most certainly deserve justice. For all of us who lack the courage to speak out that truth, or who develop a vast variety of excuses why we can or should not speak out, let people like Salai Tun Than be an example. If the voice of one retired lecturer can shake the military regime’s confidence so deeply, think what a thousand voices, raised both inside and outside Burma, could do.

Notes: Much of the information in this article concerning Salai Tun Than was taken from the Asian Human Rights Commission’s (AHRC) website at http://www.ahrchk.net/

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A wave of violent crime appears to be spreading across Burma, as the country’s crumbling economy continues to drive its poorest citizens to increasingly bold acts of desperation. Burma’s poor have been hard hit by the recent plunge of the kyat and a concomitant rise in food prices. The kyat was valued at 1,200 to the U.S. dollar this month. Reliable sources report that in many rural areas, some villagers have nothing to eat except bamboo shoots. Meanwhile, in the Rangoon satellite townships of Shwe Pyithar and Hlaing Tharyar, many families have been reduced to eating just a thin rice gruel, or in some cases, just water used in cooking rice. A government spokesperson Col. San Pwint told a media conference this month that news suggesting that flow of rice to Rangoon has decreased due to the flooding in major rice-producing regions was just a rumour started to manipulate the rice price. Burma’s strictly controlled media has been instructed not to report on the recent dramatic rise in hunger-related crimes. "Myanmar crime wave linked to hunger", The Irrawaddy, 10 September

The flash flood that swept through Ban Mae Khong Kha and Ban Mae Sala refugee camps in Mae Hong Son province, drowned 16 Karen residents. Another 26 people, still missing, are believed to be dead. More than 200 huts were swept away while a hundred more structures, including four schools, two health centres and two rice stores, were wrecked. While the Karen refugees grieve over the loss of their loved ones and their homes, they are being blamed for causing the flood by destroying the forests. The deputy chief of the Royal Forestry Department reportedly said, “Refugees cut trees illegally and slash and burn forest to clear land for farming”. How many times already have the government authorities, especially the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) and the National Security Council (NSC), blamed the marginalised peoples, making them scapegoats for deforestation? How many times has this been done with no clear evidence? In the past few years, Karen and Karenni refugees, the least of these marginalised people, have been pushed into this role of scapegoat. "After the tragedy, the blame”, The Nation, 7 September

Nearly 300 Karen villagers have fled into Burma’s southern jungles after government troops torched three villages in Pa-An province, according to the Karen National Union (KNU). The three villages, Mae Thamuhta, Wuntho and Kyelupu, were located in Karen State’s Hlaing-Bawe district, according to a spokesman for the ethnic militia, Mahn Nyein Maung. The villages were burned down last Thursday after the troops accused the villagers of being involved in the KNU guerrilla network, he told AFP by telephone. "The soldiers usually take this kind of action when they suspect some of the Karen villagers are linked to the KNU, so they set fire to all the houses in the village,” he said. The soldiers also arrested Mae Thamuhta village’s headman Hpa Yukhe, Mahn Nyein Maung said. More than 60 families were left homeless, he said, adding that some of them were now living in the forest while others headed to refugee camps on the Thai border. "Myanmar soldiers burn villages, leave hundreds homeless: KNU rebels”, AFP, Sep 17

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