

Burma Alert No.4
(April 1990)

'Free and Fair' Elections?

According to the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the 'free and fair multi-party democratic general elections' promised by General Saw Maung in 1988, will take place on 27 May 1990.

To counter criticisms of the electoral process to date, SLORC claims that all arrangements are handled by "*an independent 5-member Election Commission*". The registration of 2,392 candidates from 100 political parties for 492 seats is submitted as proof of the people's confidence in the Commission [H900227].

Protests against SLORC's banning of credible opposition leaders, the arrest and torture of opponents, violation of human rights and suppression of dissent in general, and denying media access and the right to freely organize to opposition parties are all dismissed out of hand. The Army claims that it is only implementing existing laws and ensuring that an atmosphere of "*peace and tranquillity prevails so that elections can be held*" [H900227].

All attempts to mediate a more equitable process, including those of the German parliamentarians who visited Rangoon recently and the United Nations Human Rights Commission in February, are viewed by SLORC as "*interference by outside powers in the internal affairs of the country*" [H900227].

Post-Elections Scenario:

Given SLORC's inflexibility and knowing that General Ne Win is the real power behind the scene, it is unlikely that Rangoon will now make any significant concessions. It will instead use the election results to proclaim that multi-party parliamentary democracy is alive and well in Burma.

Faced with a diplomatic stalemate, many countries that are unable or unwilling to initiate stronger measures against the Myanmar regime, may be tempted to take these assurances at face-value. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration alarmed, at the doubling of Burma's opium harvest [A900323], may push for a resumption of aid in spite of the General Accounting Office report that U.S. drug "*enforcement efforts in Burma are not effective*". U.S. Ambassador Burton Levin, who is critical of SLORC, could also be replaced this summer [KF900319].

A fear of being left out of the rush to exploit Burma's natural resources, especially oil, could also hasten recognition of the regime. Currently known oil reserves in the U.K. will, at present production rates, be depleted by 1995; in the U.S. by 1997; in Canada by 2000; and in the U.S.S.R. by 2001 [A900202]. For example in the U.S., Amoco is claiming that it was competing with other industrialized nations [KA900212].

Refutation of SLORC's Arguments:

1. Burma is a member of the UNITED NATIONS and, as such, it is accountable for its observance of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The U.N. Human Rights Commission's investigation of human rights abuses in Burma is, therefore, not an interference by outside powers.

2. At the 46th session of the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva, the INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION OF JURISTS stated that current laws in Burma *"seriously prejudice the possibility of a free and fair election"* [H900227].

The 12 countries of the EUROPEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY, AUSTRALIA, CANADA, JAPAN, NORWAY, SWEDEN, the UNITED STATES of AMERICA and a number of non-government organizations, including AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, also pointed out that the current electoral process does not meet with international standards for fair and free multi-party democratic elections [H900227].

All 43 members of the Commission (including PAKISTAN and CHINA) associated themselves with the resolution which called for *"all political parties and personalities to be allowed to participate fully in the elections"* and the appointment of a special rapporteur. No country, not even South Africa, has to date received such a general and quick condemnation [D900307].

General Saw Maung, therefore, cannot claim that he is only implementing existing laws and ensuring that peace and tranquillity prevail.

In fact, the intensified military campaigns against the Kachins [F900215], Mons, Karens and student refugee camps show that Rangoon is not interested in peace [D900105-23, N891230, F900222 & A900119].

The forced relocation of half a million people from Rangoon, Mandalay, Bassein, Prome and Taunggyi to the countryside, since April 1989 [F900125] shows that SLORC is not interested in tranquillity either [Ny900321].

Those being evicted are from areas where anti-military sentiments erupted in 1988. Officially, only squatters are being moved but diplomats report that 2-story buildings of framed timber, brick and even steel-reinforced concrete are also being demolished. The victims are not compensated but they have to buy land, building permits and materials from the regime to re-build. Most cannot afford to and live in shanties. There are few wells, no electricity, no markets and no medical facilities at the new sites [Ny900321].

3. Of the 2,392 candidates registered for the elections, 492 are members of the National Unity Party (NUP) [A900119]. The remaining 1,900 candidates represent 99 political parties and at least 83 independents. Several of the parties are suspected to have even been created by the NUP to split the opposition and undermine their credibility [F881027]. Allegedly top secret documents on Operation Min-Yan-Naing seem to confirm these suspicions. It was launched by the Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence in March 1989 to sow confusion and dissension among the opposition [AK900222].

Only 3 of the 1,900 non-NUP candidates have any political relevance - Thakin Chit Maung, Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein, and ex-Brig.Gen. Aung Gyi of the United Nationals Democracy Party (UNDP). The first 2 are lightweights and Aung Gyi is suspected to be in league with NUP/SLORC [F900118]. All other prominent politicians have been jailed, detained or barred from the elections.

In addition, the NUP is the old Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) under a new name. The BSPP was the political arm of the Burma Army, and the man behind the BSPP, the Army and now SLORC is General Ne Win. Given these facts, the statistical data loses much of its credibility.

4. As for the 'independent' 5-member Election Commission, Chairman U Kyaw Nyunt admits that he has no power to enforce its recommendations [A881021].
5. The May 27 'general elections' will not bring to power a new government. The duty of the 492 elected members is only to draft a constitution under which another general election can be held. A time-frame is not specified. In the meanwhile, SLORC and Ne Win will remain in power [F900118 & A900119].

The May elections are, therefore, only an elaborate public relations exercise by SLORC to mute international criticism and perhaps help it to regain some of the foreign aid it needs to survive. **This must be denied to SLORC.**

Some Suggestions for Action:

I. GOVERNMENT RECOGNITION:

It is critical that our respective governments not accept the election results at face-value. To give SLORC's 'elected' national assembly a stamp of legitimacy because of economic and other considerations would make a mockery of democracy and the United Nations. **Nothing will have changed in Burma.**

You or your organization could write to your government about how you would like it to respond to the elections (some addresses are given below).

Non-U.S. groups are also urged to write to the U.S. House of Representative's ASIA PACIFIC SUBCOMMITTEE headed by STEPHEN SOLARZ (see F.E.E.Review, 22 March 1990 - Asia's Congressman). Copies may be sent to Asiawatch, the Heritage Foundation, the State Department's Office of Thailand & Burma Affairs.

II. ECONOMIC SANCTIONS:

You or your organization could write to your government representative c/o the Parliament, the Congress, the Bundestag, etc. calling for economic sanctions against Myanmar, especially, an embargo on the trade and import of Burmese wood and wood products as well as those processed in another country such as Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Several organizations have already initiated such sanctions. Try to get non-Burma interest groups to support your actions.

In the U.S., Senators DANIEL MOYNIHAN and STEVE SYMMS (Idaho) have introduced legislation S.B.822 and Representative ROBERT MATSUI has introduced bill H.B.2578. Formal letters of support for both bills from organizations including those based outside the U.S. are very useful. Please write now.

Additionally, U.S. citizens are urged to write to Senator LLOYD BENTSEN (Texas) supporting bill S.B.822. He is chairman of the Finance Committee that will decide on it. Other Committee members to write to are: JOHN H. CHAFEE (Rhode Island), JOHN DANFORTH (Missouri), BOB PACKWOOD (Oregon), and GEORGE MITCHELL (Maine). Chafee and Danforth are currently the most negative about the bill. Letters especially from residents of their State will be most helpful.

III. BOYCOTT TOURISM TO BURMA:

You or your organization could write, phone or visit any company in your neighbourhood offering tours to Burma, including university and museum groups. Send copies of letters and statements to Travel magazines, Travel editors of your local newspapers, Burmese Embassies, and the media in Bangkok (see below).

Send copies to Thai officials to warn them of a possible boycott of Thailand.

Picket international tourism fairs wherever MANDALAY MYANMAR TOURS (see "Alert No.3") appears, especially, Intertour in Hong Kong, International Tourism Exchange in Berlin, and similar events in France, Italy and elsewhere. Enlist help from local interest groups. If you have information on these tourism fairs and their dates, please share them. Thank you.

Briefly explain how tourism is being encouraged while Burma's rainforests are being destroyed to earn foreign exchange to buy arms to keep an illegal and repressive regime in power. In addition, warn tourists that Burma is unsafe. Violence could break out at any time. Help the people by boycotting Burma.

IV. BLACKLISTING BUSINESSES:

You or your organization could write, phone or visit companies listed in the "Burma Alert" or elsewhere. Inform them factually that a worldwide blacklist of companies that will not be welcomed in Burma in the future, is being compiled. Tell them that agreements signed with the present regime will be contested in a court of law and if possible revoked. Compensation may be claimed from the companies for abetting the regime's brutal repression of the people of Burma. Show them in practical terms that it is a bad risk for the company and that their employees in Burma may also be at risk.

The decision of the 46th session of the U.N. Human Rights Commission should be relayed to them. Doing business in Burma today is worse than doing business with South Africa. Warn the companies that if they persist, the blacklist will be published as full-page advertisements in leading newspapers world-wide.

Action Co-ordination:

If you or your organization is intending to take any of the actions suggested above, we should keep in touch and exchange information so that we can conserve our resources. As an example, I envisage that an organization or individual in Germany would, in its/his/her own name,:

- write the German government (plus the U.S. Asia Pacific Subcommittee)
- lobby for EEC economic sanctions,
- contact the travel industry in Germany and copy the Burmese Embassies in Berlin and Bonn (as well as the Thai government and the media),
- contact companies like Fritz Werner about the blacklist,
- start collecting funds in Germany to advertise the blacklist and making enquiries about what newspaper will give it the best exposure.

I believe it will be best if we work independently, at our own initiative, and according to our own time table and our human and financial resources. We need to keep each other informed only to ensure that we are covering all points. In countries where we have no contacts, an organization or individual in a neighbouring country could volunteer to cover that country as well. There is no reason either why more than one group or individual in each country could not be active. The more that are involved, the better it will be. Please continue to send me names and addresses of companies for publication.

Sources: [A900202] = Asiaweek [H900227] = U.N. Human Rights Commission
 [AK900222] = C.R.D.B.Report [KA900212] = Private Correspondence
 [B900105] = Bangkok Post [KF900319] = Kachinland Foundation Report
 [D900307] = Dawn A.B.S.D.F. [N891230] = The Nation, Bangkok
 [F900222] = F.E.E.Review [Ny900321] = New York Times

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