



A BRIEFING BY  
THE BURMA CAMPAIGN UK

# Boycott Burma Holidays

## HOW TOURISM BENEFITS BURMA'S DICTATORS

### Introduction

**Burma has been ruled by one of the world's most brutal military dictatorships for the last forty years; a dictatorship charged by the United Nations with a "crime against humanity" for its systematic abuse of human rights. The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in Burma's 1990 election. The result has never been honoured.**

**Tourism provides the dictatorship with millions of pounds every year, while forced labour has been used to develop many tourist facilities. For these reasons, Aung San Suu Kyi has asked tourists not to visit Burma.**

### The Tourism Boycott

Tourism to Burma helps sustain one of the most brutal and destructive regimes in the world. A regime that was weak and bankrupt in 1988 has used foreign investment and hard foreign currency to double the size of its military and strengthen its grip on power. The Burmese democracy movement called for a boycott of tourism to Burma in 1995 after the regime announced its plans to develop mass international tourism with 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996'. The military regime in Burma, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has identified tourism as a vital source of income. They also hope that international tourists can bring greater respectability and credibility to a military dictatorship with one of the world's worst human rights records.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD and Burma's exiled government have all asked tourists not to visit Burma. Tourism in Burma provides the dictatorship with millions of pounds every year, while the development of tourism has escalated human rights abuses. Many thousands of Burmese people have been forcibly evicted from their homes to make way for tourist projects. Many of the roads and railways that tourists travel on or the airports they pass through, have been built using forced labour. The United Nations International Labour Organisation (ILO) has accused the regime of a 'crime against humanity' for its systematic use of forced labour, used by the regime "to encourage private investment in infrastructure development, public sector works and tourism projects".

### Burma's military regime is responsible for:

- Systematic and widespread use of forced labour.
- Rape as a weapon of war against ethnic women and children.
- At least 1,300 political prisoners, many of whom are routinely tortured.
- More child soldiers than any other country in the world.



- Nearly half the government budget spent on the military and just 19p per person per year on health.
- One in ten babies dying before their fifth birthday.
- Over 60% of Burmese people living in extreme poverty, earning less than 60p a day.





“Burma will be here for many years, so tell your friends to visit us later. Visiting now is tantamount to condoning the regime.”  
**Aung San Suu Kyi**



**Child and forced labour has been used to build tourist infrastructure**

## the issues:

### → Human Rights abuses are directly linked to tourism development

In Burma many human rights abuses are directly connected to the regime’s drive to develop the country for tourists. More than one million people have been forced out of their homes in order to ‘beautify’ cities, suppress dissent, and to make way for tourism developments, such as hotels, airports and golf courses. In Pagan, where over 5000 people were forced to pack their belongings and move to an undeveloped area, many were given just 10 hours’ notice and little compensation for the destruction of their homes. In February 2004, Burmese soldiers rounded up ethnic Salons, or ‘sea gypsies’ who normally live on boats in the Mergui Archipelago, forced them to live on land and take part in a ‘Salon Festival’ aimed at foreign tourists. The Salons were forced to perform traditional dances for the tourists.

Throughout Burma men, women, children and the elderly have been forced to labour on roads, railways and tourism projects, under the harshest conditions. Tourist sites have been renovated using forced labour, such as the moat surrounding the Golden Palace in Mandalay. The new airport at Mandalay, which opened in 2000 specifically to handle international flights, was partly built with forced labour and many people were forced from their homes to make

way for the project. The 2001 US State Department Report on Human Rights, states that in Mrauk U, a popular site of ancient temple ruins, “the government used forced labor to prepare the city for expected tourist arrivals.”

### Tourism helps sustain one of the most brutal military regimes in the world.

Since Burma opened up to tourism in 1988, over \$1.1 billion has been invested in the hotel and tourism industry. Income from tourism is helping sustain military rule, not only through tourist spending, but also through investment in the infrastructure essential to support tourism – hotels, roads, railways and airports. Official figures estimate Burma earns \$100 million a year from tourism. In 2001-2002, just two of Burma’s top tourist attractions generated more than US\$1.3 million in entrance fees. There is simply no way to operate in Burma or visit the country without providing funds to the dictatorship. While foreign investment has flowed into Burma and enabled the regime to expand the armed forces from 180,000 personnel to around 500,000, the country’s health, education and public services have almost collapsed. The regime spends nearly half the budget on the military but less than 44p per person per year on health and education combined.

### Burma’s democratically elected Government and pro-democracy movement have asked for a tourism boycott

The National League for Democracy (NLD), Burma’s legitimate democratic government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, first called for tourists and the tourism industry to stay away from Burma in 1995. Their position remains unchanged today. In an interview with the Burma Campaign UK in 2002, Aung San Suu Kyi confirmed that the NLD’s policy on the boycott had not changed: “The position remains the same.” In 2003 the NLD issued a statement to confirm that “the present situation has not reached the extent that tourists should be encouraged to visit Myanmar (Burma).”

Burma’s Government in exile – the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) also supports the boycott. It is a position that has the backing of exile Burmese democracy groups around the world, the UK Government and the European Union. Tourists and tour operators have generally respected the call for a tourism boycott, with only a handful of small companies now operating tours to Burma.





## the myths:

### → **Doesn't the tourism boycott hurt ordinary Burmese people?**

A very small percentage of ordinary people in Burma benefit from tourism. No one is suggesting that this group is unimportant. However, it has to be emphasised that only a minority of Burma's 48 million people are engaged in the tourism industry. Around 75% of Burma's people make their living from agriculture. Of the remaining 25% only a small percentage ever come into contact with tourists.

The greatest obstacle to prosperity for people in Burma is the regime itself. The more revenue it is able to earn from tourism and foreign investment, the longer it will be able to stay in power. Change will only come if international pressure on the regime is maintained to cut its economic lifeline. The Tourism Boycott is part of a short-term strategy to ensure long-term prosperity, security and freedom for all of the peoples of Burma.

### **Can't independent tourists avoid giving money to the regime?**

The Observer reported that "according to western diplomats in Rangoon, the military junta and their cronies are benefiting directly from recent tourism developments. A list of owners of the hotel plots at the newest beach resort in the country, Ngwesaung, reads like a Who's Who of generals and their cronies."

While there has been a recent increase in the number of privately owned services in Burma, this does not prevent funds from reaching the authorities. Given the levels of corruption and cronyism that exist in Burma, it is impossible to know whether services sold to private individuals haven't in fact been sold to the regime's own families and business contacts. There is simply no way to operate in Burma or holiday in the country without providing income to the regime. In August 2002 Burma's Minister of Hotels and Tourism Maj-Gen Saw Lwin admitted that the government receives about 12 per cent of the income even of private tourism services.

### **Isn't it true that people in Burma don't want a tourism boycott?**

Such claims are often made by those who promote tourism to Burma and have spent their time talking almost exclusively to Burmese people working in the tourism industry. They might get a different answer if they talked to those who have been forced from their homes to make way for tourist developments or forced to build tourist facilities.

In a country that has measured the opinions of its people just once in the last 42 years, during the 1990 election, there is little to guide us as to what most ordinary Burmese people really feel about the

tourism issue. The call for a tourism boycott comes from Burma's elected leaders. The National League for Democracy (NLD) remains the only party mandated to represent the Burmese people. It is a party that continues to draw the support and respect of people inside and outside the country.

### **Doesn't contact with tourists encourage democracy and prevent abuses in Burma more than isolation?**

"Burmese people know their own problems better than anyone else. They know what they want – they want democracy – and many have died for it. To suggest that there's anything new that tourists can teach the people of Burma about their own situation is not simply patronising – it's also racist." Aung San Suu Kyi

Asking tourists not to take a holiday in Burma is not to call for complete isolation of the country. Economic sanctions and diplomatic engagement must go hand in hand. However, the typical tourist on holiday in Burma is there to visit a beautiful country, look at the historic monuments and temples and enjoy a new and exotic holiday destination. But even for those tourists wishing to see Burma's problems for themselves, there is very little opportunity to discover the realities of life in Burma.





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→ Burmese people are not free to discuss politics with foreigners and can face punishment or imprisonment if caught. The military's tight control keeps genuine interaction between Burmese and visitors to a minimum. In 2001, for example, the Myanmar Tourism Promotion Board (MTPB) issued an order calling on local officials to protect tourists and prevent potential conflicts by limiting "unnecessary contact" between foreigners and ordinary Burmese. Much of the country remains strictly off-limits to tourists, particularly in border areas where drug production and anti-insurgency activities continue.

### Can't foreign travellers bring valuable information to the people of Burma?

In an interview with the BBC in December 2002, Aung San Suu Kyi said:

"I have to say quite frankly that the people of Burma, in general, do not depend on tourists and foreign visitors to bring them information. If they are really intent on getting information about what is going on in the world and what is going on with regard to Burma, then they listen to foreign radio programmes such as the BBC and the DVB, the Democratic Voice of Burma, Radio Free Asia and so on."

According to Intermedia, a private firm hired by the BBC and Voice of America (VOA) to survey their

impact in Burma, 39 percent of the population listen to the BBC and 30 percent to Voice of America.

### Don't we have a right to holiday where we want and not be told where we can and can't go?

The Tourism Boycott is like any other ethical consumer issue. We inform people about the call for a boycott from Burma's democracy movement and the impact of tourism in Burma so that people can make an informed choice about whether to visit or not. The fact is, many tourists have decided to respect the wishes of Burma's democrats and do not go to Burma on holiday, as have most major tour operators.

### What about other countries with repressive governments?

It is a rare country that does not have human rights issues but

there are many differences between Burma and other countries. Burma is unique because of the scale of human rights abuses directly connected to tourism, because tourism revenue is helping prolong the life of an illegitimate regime and because the country has a democratically elected government which has specifically asked all tourists to stay away.

## Support The Tourism Boycott

- Don't visit Burma on holiday
- Take action on our website [www.burmacampaign.org.uk](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk)
- Join the Burma Campaign UK

I would like more information about the work of The Burma Campaign UK

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