



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

MARCH 2011

New Government – Same Dictatorship

On 30 March, Burma's dictator, Than Shwe, officially disbanded the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the body through which Burma's dictators have ruled the country since 1997. The new government and its President, Thein Sein, were sworn in.

The new government is the final stage in the regime's so-called 'roadmap to democracy', following the sham election last November. However, the changes are more about rebranding than genuine reform. Dictatorship remains in Burma, guaranteed by a new Constitution and a new political structure. The new parliament has no real power. Instead, real power still lies firmly with the military and a new all-powerful body, the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC).



Opening ceremony for Burma's new government (MRTV)

The transfer of power from the State Peace and Development Council to the National Defence and Security Council is just the latest in a series of rebrandings since the establishment of the first dictatorship in Burma in 1962, led by General Ne Win. Ne Win also introduced a new constitution through a rigged referendum and created a rubber-stamp parliament.

The real facts on the ground are that there are no new freedoms, that human rights abuses continue, and that those ruling Burma clearly have no intention of introducing any genuine reforms to improve human rights or move towards democracy.

“Sanctions Must Remain” – Aung San Suu Kyi

In April, the EU member states renew their joint policy on Burma. Ahead of this decision, some EU governments, in particular Germany and Italy, which have strong domestic business lobbies interested in investing in Burma, have been arguing that some sanctions should be relaxed.

The National League for Democracy published their review of sanctions in February, which rejected the lifting of sanctions without any progress on human rights and democracy. In an interview with a German newspaper, Aung San Suu Kyi reiterated this position, saying “sanctions must remain in place. Sanctions should only be lifted when something has changed here.”

If the EU is to abide by its own official conclusions from April last year, it is clear there is no justification for relaxing sanctions.

The EU made four key demands to the dictatorship. Summarised, they were; for genuine dialogue, credible free and fair elections, more engagement with the international community to work towards a peaceful transition to democracy, and to end violations of international law. None of these demands were met, and in some instances the situation actually got worse.

The official position is that the EU will; ‘revise, amend or reinforce the measures it has already adopted in light of developments on the ground.’

For more details on EU policy, see Burma Campaign UK's new briefing: What next for EU Burma Policy?

<http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/what-next-for-eu-burma-policy>

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Denmark and Latvia Support UN Burma Inquiry

Two more European countries have expressed support for international investigations into human rights abuses in Burma, following protests in London targeting six European countries.

Latvia stated it supports a UN Commission of Inquiry, 'in principle', while Denmark stated it; 'supports in principle the establishment of an international investigation into human rights abuses in Burma... a Commission could be a possible model for an international investigation.'

The pressure is now on the European Union to officially support a UN Commission of Inquiry.



The protests were held on the 44th birthday of political prisoner Ko Mya Aye and led by his daughter Wai Hnin, Campaigns Officer at Burma Campaign UK. Burma Campaign UK has published a briefing on how the detention and treatment of political prisoners in Burma constitutes crimes against humanity.

The briefing is available at: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/political-prisoners-in-burma-a-crime-against-humanity>

Nearly 25% of Burma's new budget to go on Defence

Even before Burma's new parliament met, the regime had set out the new national budget. According to a report in the Government Gazette on 1 March, the budget allocates 1.8 trillion kyat (\$2 billion), or 23.6% of the budget this year, will go to defence. In contrast, the health sector will get 99.5 billion kyat (\$110 million), or 1.3%.

There are also reports that in addition to the budget, the commander-in-chief of the Army will have access to unlimited 'special funds'. According to the Irrawaddy, the Special Fund Law, which was also brought in before the first session of Burma's new Parliament, states that "The Tatmadaw [armed forces] commander-in-chief has the authority to use Special Funding in the local currency or foreign currency while providing for the non-disintegration of the Union; the non-disintegration of national solidarity; and the perpetuation of national sovereignty... For the spending of the Special Funding, no person or organization can question, propose and audit."

Burmese Army breaks ceasefire in Shan State

In mid-March the Shan State Army (SSA North), an ethnic armed group which has been on ceasefire, was attacked by Burma Army soldiers, according to the Shan Herald Agency for News. There are also reports that hundreds of civilians have fled the conflict areas.

On 21 March, The New Light of Myanmar, a state-run newspaper, for the first time in twenty years described the Shan State Army-North (SSA-North) as "insurgents" committing "terrorist acts".

The risk of increased conflict is growing as the SSA North and other ceasefire ethnic groups are under pressure to surrender and become Border Guard Forces under the control of the Burma Army.

Reports in the Irrawaddy also suggest that the regime has ordered Burmese Army forces based in ethnic areas to relaunch their 'Four Cuts' strategy against the ethnic ceasefire groups that continue to refuse to become Border Guard Forces. The Burmese Army's 'Four Cuts' policy was developed in the 1960s and used to undermine ethnic armed groups by cutting off access to food, funds, information and recruitment. This scorched earth policy has had a devastating impact on ethnic civilians in Eastern Burma.

A proposal submitted by a Mon MP in the new Parliament calling on the government to work towards building stronger relations with ethnic groups was defeated by 520 votes against to 106 votes in favour, according to Democratic Voice of Burma.

Earthquake hits North-Eastern Burma

On March 24th a magnitude 6.8 earthquake hit Shan State in the North-East of Burma, near the border with Thailand and Laos. Its effects were felt across the region from Bangkok to Hanoi.

The Burmese government initially put the death toll at 74. However, recent reports from inside the country have suggested that actual figures are much higher. One Irrawaddy reporter has quoted local Red Cross officials as putting the figure at over 150. Thousands have been made homeless by the quake and many villages, as well as bridges and roads, have been severely damaged. While aid has reached many in more populated areas, the pace of delivery has been slow and those in rural areas have found it particularly difficult to access support.

Government bans Skype

In a move that is yet another blow to public internet access in Burma, the government has banned the use of 'voice over internet protocol' (VoIP) services to make overseas calls. The directive, issued on March 2nd by the Myanmar Posts and Telecommunication Corporation (MPT), will mean that overseas calls made using the increasingly popular VoIP services such as Skype, Google Talk and Pango will be prohibited. The ban has been justified by the government on the basis that the use of VoIP services has diverted revenue away from state-run overseas calls services.

Both the cost of mobile phone ownership and the government charges on conventional overseas phone calls are prohibitively high in Burma. With the use of VoIP services costing a fraction of conventional phone calls, services such as Skype and Google Talk have become often the only affordable way to contact friends and family living and working outside Burma.

Swiss government to investigate FIFA's Burma spending

The Swiss government is to investigate whether FIFA, the international governing body of football based in Zurich, has violated the country's sanctions against Burma, according to Swiss news magazine Die Wochenzeitung.

The move follows FIFA President Sepp Blatter's controversial visit to Burma in March. He was invited by regime business crony and head of the Myanmar Football Federation Zaw Zaw. Zaw Zaw is subject to EU, US and Swiss Burma sanctions for his close ties to the Burmese regime. According to the reports, FIFA's Burma funding included a grant of US \$400,000 directly to Zaw Zaw's company Max Myanmar Group to renovate the Youth Training Center in Rangoon. Financial transactions with companies connected to Zaw Zaw would constitute a breach of EU sanctions.



Sepp Blatter with President of Myanmar Football Federation Zaw Zaw (R) (Photo: The Irrawaddy)

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**for Human Rights, Democracy
& Development in Burma**