

Rohingya refugees forced out to sea by Thai authorities

The Thai government faced international condemnation after reports that Thai authorities forcibly expelled Rohingya boat people, towing them out to sea and setting them adrift.

Around 1000 Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers, fleeing persecution in Burma and squalid living conditions in Bangladesh, were intercepted by the Thai navy in December 2008. They were subsequently towed into international waters in boats without engines and with little food and water. Hundreds are feared drowned, others were rescued off the coast of India and Indonesia, some claiming to have been beaten by Thai soldiers.

The Rohingya are a mainly Muslim ethnic group in western Burma. They are subjected to systematic, persistent and widespread human rights violations by the ruling military regime, including denial of citizenship rights, severe restrictions of freedom of movement and arbitrary arrests.



Rohingya refugees apprehended by the Thai authorities.
(Photo: Royal Thai Navy)

Ethnic groups reject 2010 elections

The Kachin Independence Organization and the Kachin National Organization have stated they will not take part in the 2010 elections. Colonel Lamang Brang Seng, a spokesperson for the KNO, told Mizzima News, "We don't think the election will be free and fair," and added that the elections and the junta's roadmap are designed to further entrench military rule in Burma.

Similarly, the New Mon State Party and the Mon National Democratic Front announced they would not contest the elections if the SPDC-drafted constitution remains in its current form. Naing Aung Ma Ngae, a spokesperson for the New Mon State Party, said, "Regarding the 2010 elections, I think it is unlikely that we will participate in it if there is no revision of the 2008 constitution."

UK Government - Burma's 2010 Election will entrench military rule

British Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell MP has strongly criticised the Burmese military regime's elections planned for 2010, saying that they are "designed to entrench military rule behind a facade

of civilian government." The Minister also stated that; "We will continue to give our full support to the UN Secretary General and his efforts to break the current deadlock."

"The 2010 elections could be the freest and fairest in the world, but it would make little difference as the constitution they bring in keeps the dictatorship in power", said Mark Farmaner, Director of Burma Campaign UK. "The British government is right to condemn them. The United Nations should focus on the release of political prisoners as a first step towards genuine negotiations and a transition to democracy. We hope UN Envoy Ibrahim Gambari will make this his top priority, and not be duped by the regime's 2010 election con."

Student Union member sentenced to 104 years in jail

A member of the All Burma Federation of Students Unions has been sentenced to a total of 104 years in jail, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. Bo Min Yu Ko, aka Phyo Gyi, in his early 20s, was arrested on 16 September 2008.

He was sentenced on 3 January by Obo Prison Court in Mandalay Division. He was charged under many different sections of law, including 6 counts under Section 13/1 of the Immigration Act alone. Bo Min Yu Ko was not allowed to have a defence lawyer and his family were not allowed to attend his court hearing.

Political prisoner in danger of losing his life

Political prisoner Zaw Naing Htwe is in danger of losing his life at Four Mile Labour Camp near Taungoo Town in Pegu Division, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. He is currently being held in iron shackles whilst being forced to perform hard labour by the authorities. He is not being given enough food and water. On December 15 2008 he was sentenced to 9 years in prison after he received a letter from his elder brother, 88 Generation Students Group member Kyaw Kyaw Htwe on 2 February 2008 during a prison visit.

In 2008, at least 17 political prisoners were transferred to labour camps around Burma.

Leading Saffron Revolution monk 'on hunger strike'

There are unconfirmed reports that U Gambira, leader of The All Burmese Monks' Alliance, has been staging a hunger strike. The reports emerged while he was being held in Mandalay prison. In mid-January, he was transferred to the remote Khandee prison in Sagaing division, 1200 miles north of Rangoon. U Gambira was sentenced to a total of 68 years in detention. He was one of the leading monks during the 2007 Saffron Revolution.

Monk dies in detention

Monk U Arnanda, 61, of North Okkalapa township's Thitsa Tharaphu monastery has died in detention in Insein prison, according to reports from the Democratic Voice of Burma. Several other monks and nuns held in the prison are reported to be suffering health problems due to the lack of provisions.

Nargis volunteer sentenced to 10 years

Khin Maung Win, a volunteer who provided relief services for victims of Cyclone Nargis, was sentenced to ten years imprisonment with hard labour on 5 January. He was found guilty of establishing an unlawful organization and undertaking an illegal border crossing. Khin Maung Win is a member of the 'New Generation' group, which campaigned against the regime's constitution and sham referendum. He was arrested on 10 October last year while acting as a relief campaign volunteer in cyclone affected areas of the country.

Cyclone Nargis, which struck Burma on May 2-3 of last year, left around 140,000 people dead or missing.

Khin Maung Win had worked in Malaysia and was forced to return illegally to Burma after losing his passport abroad. Nyi Nyi Hlaing, a Rangoon lawyer who is familiar with this case, told Mizzima News that, "Most Burmese citizens who lose their passport return to Burma illegally. But only Ko Khin Maung Win was punished because of his political activities."

'Six million Burmese need food'

Acute food shortages are occurring across Burma warns the United Nations despite a better than expected annual rice harvest. The UN Agency, the World Food Program (WFP), has warned that 6 million Burmese people are now in need of food aid, including a million people in the Irrawaddy Delta, which was hit by Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. The WFP also warns that the regime is restricting it from being able to get enough food to the Rohingya and Chin areas in western Burma.

Experts predicted that following Cyclone Nargis Burma would experience severe food shortages. However, the WFP has stated that food shortages are indeed occurring but not because of the predicted lack of food. Cyclone Nargis did cause rice yields to fall in the Irrawaddy Delta, but this has been compensated for by increased yields in other areas. The WFP blamed food shortages on the regime preventing the WFP from buying rice inside Burma and blocking the UN agency from accessing the worst hit areas.

Burma among 'worst of the worst' for freedom

Freedom House has ranked Burma among the 'worst of the worst' countries in its annual survey on freedom. In its report 'The Freedom in the World 2009' Burma scored the lowest possible ranking for both political rights and civil liberties. The report said that Burma was "one of the world's most repressive regimes" and that its ratings had declined since the previous year.

Insurance giant fined for Burma bribes

The world's biggest insurance company, Aon, has been fined £5.25 million by the UK Financial Services Authority (FSA) for making suspicious payments to a number of countries, including Burma, and for failing to enforce adequate anti-corruption measures.

The transactions highlighted by the regulator are known as introducers and are used to help generate new business for the company. The Times

newspaper reported that Aon paid an “introducer” of £2.13 million (\$3.25 million) to a company owned by the Burmese regime. The FSA stated that between 2005-2007 Aon made payments to companies in 66 countries including Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Burma, Indonesia and Vietnam. The company has admitted that the payments were mainly in the aviation and energy sector. The fine is the largest financial crime related fine imposed by the FSA to date.

The role of the insurance sector in providing a financial lifeline to the Burmese regime was highlighted by the Burma Campaign UK report “Insuring Repression” in July 2008, the report is available here: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/insurance.php>

Falling gas prices hit Junta

The Burmese junta is likely to see its lucrative income from foreign gas sales fall steeply as the global financial crisis hits Burma, according to economist Sean Turnell, Professor at Australia’s Macquarie University. In an interview with The Irrawaddy, he said that “ losses from gas sales will most likely hurt the military leadership more than Burma’s ordinary citizens...because much of the revenue from the country’s natural resources goes into weapons or is spent on grandiose projects of little or no benefit to the population.”

The Burmese regime has admitted that gas exports account for around 40 percent of all export income and between April and December 2008 fell by 28.6% - costing the regime \$670 million. To make matters worse the cost of imports has risen in the same period leading to a 39% drop in the country’s trade surplus. Turnell predicts that the worse is yet to come as the data does not include a steep dive in international commodity prices since November 2008.

US imposes new sanctions on regime backers

The United States has imposed a range of new sanctions against two people and 14 companies that help to fund the Burmese regime. The US authorities cited the regime’s continued imprisonment of democracy activists for the new sanctions. US authorities have now imposed sanctions on 100 people and entities, targeting key state-owned enterprises, senior junta officials, regime cronies and their business networks.

The new sanctions freeze any assets the named people or companies have under US jurisdiction and bars any US citizen from having any financial and commercial transactions with the sanction targets.

Those targeted include known regime cronies, such as Tay Za and Steven Law, new individuals have been added to the list including Zaw Zaw and Win Aung.

China begins multi-billion dollar construction of new gas pipeline

Reports indicate that during the first half of 2009 China is planning to start building a gas and petrol pipeline running from Arakan State in western Burma to China. The pipelines are part of a 30 year deal allowing state owned China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) to purchase gas from gas fields located offshore. It is estimated that construction will cost US\$1.04 billion for the gas pipeline and \$1.5 billion for the petroleum pipeline.

The gas field is expected to produce more than 10 trillion cubic feet of gas per year. It is operated by a consortium of companies with regime owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise holding a 15 percent share, Daewoo International has a 51 percent stake in the fields, India’s Oil and National Gas owns 17 percent, GAIL India 8.5 percent and Korea Gas 8.5 percent.

Aung San Suu Kyi wins Trumpet of Conscience Award



“Realizing the Dream”, the non-profit organization set up in honour of civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr. has awarded Burma’s democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi the prestigious Trumpet of Conscience Award. It was presented by Queen Noor of Jordan and Martin Luther King III, the son of Martin Luther King Jr. In her absence, the award was accepted by Aung Ding, the Executive Director of US Campaign for Burma.

Presenting the award Queen Noor said that “Aung San Suu Kyi epitomizes the ideals of this award... she is a freedom fighter and passionate advocate for the use of non-violent action against repression and military force... Aung San Suu Kyi has led her followers in Burma to engage the repressor with calm, passion and collective conviction”

Receiving the award Aung Din said “As Dr. King did,

and as you all do, Aung San Suu Kyi has a dream; her dream is simple and innocent: She wants to help people to have freedom from fear, freedom from oppression and freedom to exercise their fundamental rights”.

AIDS patients forced out of monastery

The Burmese regime forced 35 HIV/AIDS patients to leave a Rangoon monastery where they had been receiving free treatment. The authorities ordered the patients to move to a hospital. However, many of the patients, including two children, were too poor to go the hospital where they would have had to pay for treatment. The regime accused the monastery of having unauthorised “guests” in the monastery. Report of crackdown on churches in Rangoon According to the news agency Mizzima, local authorities in Rangoon have ordered at least 100 churches to stop holding worship services. Mizzima also reported that 50 pastors were forced to sign at least five documents promising to cease church services. The pastors were reportedly warned they could be jailed if they disobeyed the order. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), in a statement condemning the crackdown, said it had also received reports that several churches have been locked and sealed, including three churches in South Dagon Township: the Evangelical Baptist Church, the Karen Baptist Church and the Dagon Joshua Church.

Child labour ‘widespread in Delta’

According to reports in The Irrawaddy magazine, child labour has become widespread throughout the cyclone-hit Irrawaddy delta. It says that children aged 10 to 15 are valued sources of labour for Burmese businessmen, fishermen and farmers because they work for much lower wages than adults—between 300 and 1000 kyat (US \$0.25—0.85) per day for children, compared to wages of 1,500 to 3000 kyat (\$1.25—\$2.50) per day for adults.

10-year-old Myo Min, who lost his mother when Cyclone Nargis hit Burma in May last year, told The Irrawaddy that he works full-time aboard a fishing vessel in the delta. Po Po, 11, lost his father and his elder brother in the cyclone. He then left school to work in a restaurant in Labutta Township. He washes dishes and earns about 5,000 kyat (\$4.20) per month. He admitted that he cries every night because he misses his mother.

Labour activist jailed for 10 years

Labour activist Zaw Htay, who helped farmers file a report to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on land seizure in Magwe’s Nat Mauk township, was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment on 23

January. The Democratic Voice of Burma reported that the judges found him guilty of leaking sensitive national information by taking photographs of the land seized by the army for the report to the ILO. About 50 farmers in Nat Mauk filed a report to the ILO last year on the confiscation of over 5000 acre of farmland in villages around the town by the army.

EU gives Burma €40.5 million in aid

The European Commission has announced €40.5 million (US \$52.4 million) in humanitarian aid to Burma for 2009. €22 million has been allocated to meet the continuing needs of cyclone-hit communities in the Irrawaddy delta and €18.5 million is being provided for other vulnerable populations, including Burmese refugees in Thailand and the Rohingya in northern Arakan State.

Danish Minister’s visit to Burma breaks EU sanctions

Danish Development Minister Ulla Toraes visited Burma in January, breaking the EU Common Position ban on ministerial visits to Burma. Ulla Toraes and her delegation visited Burma from January 21-22 with Erik Solheim, Norwegian Minister for Environment and Development. The ministers visited the delta region to inspect relief and reconstruction work in the delta, which was devastated by Cyclone Nargis in May 2008.

Obama’s speech censored in Burma

The Burmese regime censored publication of a major part of US President Barack Obama’s inauguration speech in the Rangoon-based weekly journal The Voice, according to The Irrawaddy.

The censorship board banned parts of Obama’s inauguration speech that included sensitive political messages. One part of the speech that was cut was: “To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”

Tensions rise between Wa and Junta

Tensions between the Burmese military and the United Wa State Army (UWSA), an ethnic ceasefire group, have been mounting since a 30-member regime delegation was forced to disarm during a visit to Wa-held territory in Shan State on 19 January, according to The Irrawaddy.

The junta has been stepping up pressure on ethnic groups who have ceasefire agreements with the regime to disarm and support their sham elections in 2010. However, many groups, including the Wa, are very resistant to this idea.

Observers estimate that there are 20,000 UWSA soldiers currently deployed along Burma's borders with Thailand and China, and an estimated 60,000 to 120,000 Wa villagers in lower Shan State.

Statement on the Fifth Congress of the Women's League of Burma

18 January 2009

The Fifth Congress of the Women's League of Burma was held in a liberated area near the Thai-Burma border from 15–17 January, 2009.

It was attended by fifty-five representatives from member organizations, the Secretariat and working teams of the Fourth Congress Term (2007-2008). Representatives to the Congress reviewed the programs, agreed upon WLB's policies and future work plans, amended the constitution, and shared ideas and suggestions on how to improve the implementation of the WLB's programs.

The Congress also analyzed the current political situation. Not only is the SPDC continuing to detain Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Khun Htun Oo and other political prisoners, it is deliberately persecuting political detainees, and is carrying out further arrests. The SPDC is not allowing pro-democracy political parties and activists to carry out any independent organizing activities. The WLB condemns SPDC's plans to hold its "election" in 2010. The election is based on the SPDC's illegitimate constitution, and will simply endorse military rule indefinitely. The election is being held in defiance of the people's wishes and will be a totally unfair process.

The Congress laid down the future work plans for 2009-2010 for the WLB's programs: Peace and Reconciliation, Women Against Violence and Political Empowerment. During this 2009-2010 term, WLB will also prioritize activities to oppose the SPDC's 2010 Election. The Congress has formed a WLB advisory team comprised of veteran women activists and the WLB founding members.

In addition, the Congress agreed with the principle of having a strong, broad, united alliance among the democratic forces. However, WLB will not support any government or alliance which is not formed according to democratic processes.

The Women's League of Burma (WLB) is an organisation working for the advancement of the status of women towards a peaceful and just society. It was established on 9 December 1999 by twelve women's organizations based along Burma's borders with Bangladesh, India, and Thailand.

Statement by Ethnic and Democracy Groups Unity for Democracy & Civil, Liberties

Malahide, Ireland

26 January 2009

1. We, the organizations listed below, wish to express our profound thanks to the Government of the Republic of Ireland and Burma Action Ireland for their generous and kind support which has enabled us to meet here in Malahide, Ireland, from 24 to 26 January 2009.
2. We wish to express our deep appreciation and highest regards to the "Heroes of Democracy" in our country who continue to struggle with perseverance and determination to bring fundamental rights and freedom to the people of Burma in spite of the extreme risks involved.
3. We also wish to salute our courageous colleagues, many of whom have lost their lives and those who continue to languish in prison under harsh conditions, because of their efforts for democracy and civil liberties.
4. We call on the international community to help secure the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, including detained elected representatives, NLD leaders U Tin Oo and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, ethnic and democracy leaders, including Shan Nationalities League for Democracy Chairman U Khun Tun Oo, and leading members of the 88 Generation Students.
5. We are deeply appreciative of all Burma support groups, NGOs, and institutions which have tirelessly been extending assistance to the Burmese democracy movement and working for democracy in our country.
6. Burma is entering a critical period as the Burmese generals are trying to legitimize military rule in the country on the basis of a unilaterally written constitution and through elections scheduled in 2010.
7. We, therefore, unequivocally declare that we cannot accept the military sponsored constitution of 2008 in its current form. There is still time and opportunities are still available to correct the situation. We unanimously agree to pursue whatever options are available with determination and understanding in the interests of the nation.
8. We are committed to develop a unified leadership with an integrated action plan to achieve common objectives of establishing democracy and federalism in Burma.

AAPP Assistance Association for Political Prisoners
ABSDF All Burma Students' Democratic Front
CFOB Canadian Friends of Burma
ENC Ethnic Nationalities Council
FBF Free Burma Federation
FDB Forum for Democracy in Burma
IBMO International Burmese Monks Organization
MPU Members of Parliament Union
NLD-LA National League for Democracy - Liberated
Area
SYCB Students and Youth Congress of Burma
WLB Women's League of Burma
NCGUB National Coalition Government of the Union
of Burma

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Published by The Burma Campaign UK, 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT
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FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
AND DEMOCRACY IN BURMA