

Position of the NCGUB on Tourism

September 14, 2000

Background

When democracy is restored and the people are free, the Burmese democracy movement would gladly welcome visitors to Burma. However, any concerned people who care about Burma should wait for the time to visit Burma. Visiting Burma under the prevailing conditions will only help the military junta to remain in power. With more than 40 percent of the national budget every year spent on maintaining Burma's large armed forces and welfare of the country completely ignored, tourists' money can just perpetuate the vicious cycle of repression, poverty and crisis in Burma.

Rationale: boycott tourism

Why boycott? The military junta promotes tourism in Burma, as they need hard foreign exchange desperately. For example, the government is now collecting postage fees, telephone bills, and electricity payment from the population in US dollars. Forced labor, forced relocation of villagers and widespread suffering of the Burmese people have resulted because of the development of tourism in Burma.

The military junta in Burma depends on foreign aid and foreign income to survive. It desperately needs hard currency to buy arms with which it can control the population. Tourism can generate foreign exchange for the junta as it controls most sectors of the economy. The junta also hopes that tourists who see only the beautified parts of the country will help to dispel its brutal reputation and bestow it with some legitimacy.

There are many evidences that the tourism is directly linked with human rights abuses and forced labor. The latest report of the International Labor Organization stated "the military ...treat the civilian population as an unlimited pool of unpaid forced laborers and servants at their disposal. The practice of forced labor is to encourage private investment in infrastructure development, public sector works and tourism projects."

For these human rights violations, the EU and the U.S. adopted punitive actions on the military junta including ban on new investments, visa restrictions and arms embargo. Recently in April, the EU decided to take several measures reinforcing its position: freezing on the assets of members and supporters of the junta, banning exports of equipment that could be used to repress internal dissidents, and issuing a list of names within the military junta to whom a pre-existing visa ban applies. Boycotting tourism can add more pressures to the junta that is already under strong international pressures from the governments and international organizations. Any concerned people can adopt this stand in solidarity with the rest of the international community and 50 million people who needs such caring support for their cause.

Facts: The impact of tourism

The income from tourism only helps sustain the military junta and prolong the suffering of Burmese people. Tourists are required to give US \$300 to the SPDC officials upon arriving at the airport. Apart from the economic and political benefit the junta can derive from tourism, tourists who intend to visit Burma should be aware of the following facts:

Force Relocation – In order to beautify cities for tourists, thousands of families have been forcefully relocated from popular tourist destinations. These cities include Rangoon, Mandalay, Pagan, Taunggyi and Maymyo. The relocated households are usually not compensated but dumped to remote “satellite” towns with high incidence of malnutrition, infectious diseases, and poor infrastructure.

Forced Labor - Apart from forced relocations of villages, the junta also forced villagers to contribute their labor free. The slaved laborers have to provide their own tools, food and transportation. Forced relocation and forced labor have pushed hundreds of thousands to flee to malaria-infested jungle areas not under the control of the junta, causing a crisis of internally displaced people in many remote parts of Burma. People in urban areas are also subjected to forced labor particularly in city beautification projects and renovation projects in the areas of tourist attractions. The most well known is the cleaning up of the Mandalay Palace Mote.

Cultural Destruction – In its push to develop the tourist industry in Burma, the junta has destroyed the very cultural basis, which makes Burma an appealing tourist destination. Old historic buildings are being destroyed to make room for new high-rise concrete and steel structures. In 1990, the inhabitants of Pagan were moved to sanitize the famous ancient temple city for tourists. The colorful ethnic mosaic of Burma is also being “developed” according to a central master plan. This will see artificial ethnic villages built up as tourist attractions while authentic ethnic villages are assimilated into the dominant Burman culture. The most graphic illustration of this policy was the destruction of the Palace of the Prince of Kengtung of the Shan State to make room for a car parking of the hotel project.

Sex industry – Hotels are making up for their loss from absence of tourists in the past by encouraging prostitution now. Average population does not have the means to spend for the disco clubs, which are thriving on sex industry since 80% of 48 million people depend on agriculture. Human rights groups have documented that about 40,000 Burmese women and girls have been sold into prostitution in Thailand. If the tourist industry in Burma develops along the lines of neighboring Thailand, it can be expected that more Burmese women and children will be lured into the domestic flesh trade.

The spread of HIV/AIDS has been relatively rapid in Burma attributed by a huge drug addict population and a growing prostitution problem. Recent blood tests of sex workers in Mandalay found a 57 per cent positive rate, and 42 per cent in Rangoon in spite of the junta keeps secret of statistics on the HIV cases. "The number of patients tested HIV positive remain relatively low, numbering less than 25,000 in the last ten years," the junta's First-Secretary Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt lied. The reality fact reported from United Nations is that 530,000 were tested positive for HIV-AIDS in Burma.

Myth: tourism brings economic opportunities to local population - In Burma, many economic activities are being controlled by the state. In tourism sector, the Ministry of Hotel and Tourism controls most aspects of tourism operations. The ministry itself or another government agency becomes a local partner in joint ventures of huge hotel projects invested by foreign operators. For small tour companies and agents, the government controls their business licenses often in a less transparent way of extending access to only those who are close associates of the junta. The exclusive control of government over hotel operations and restrictions on market entry to private operators left a very little spillover to the local population, which otherwise could have received some benefits from expanding tourism.

Advice: Policy statement

The facts outlined above have been reported by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma, credible organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch/Asia and international news media including the New York Times, the Boston Globe and the Financial Times of London.

Along with economic sanctions from the U.S. and EU, boycotting tourism will deprive the SPDC junta of foreign income, which perpetuates repression and terror. The financial deprivation will prevent the junta from prolonging their corrupted activities and compel them to cooperate with legitimate political party NLD through dialogue means.

Given these facts, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma strongly urges tourists not to visit Burma until she can be a free place to make their trip worthwhile. The NCGUB support the views of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who has asked tourists not to visit Burma.

In her own words – The comments of Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Laureate on Tourism

(Burma Debate , November 17, 1995)

“We think it is too early for either tourists or investment or aid to come pouring into Burma. We would like to see that these things are conditional on genuine progress towards democratization.... They should show respect for the [United Nations] General Assembly resolution. The General Assembly resolution of 1994 spells out what is necessary before it can be seen that Burma is really on the road to democratization. So, I think the clauses of that resolution should be implemented before we can take it that the government is really on the road to democratization.”