



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

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Burma's regime attacking civilians in Shan State

Since the dictatorship broke a 22 year long ceasefire agreement with the Shan State Army – North on 13th March, there has been a major increase in human rights abuses. 3,500 Burmese Army soldiers have taken part in a military offensive in north-central Shan State, an area with a population of 100,000. Sixty-five clashes were reported in the first three weeks of the dictatorship breaking the ceasefire. Civilians are being targeted in the military offensive, with mortar bombs fired at civilian villages. Abuses committed by the Burmese Army include arbitrary execution, arbitrary detention, torture, looting, rape, forced relocation and forced labour. These abuses are violations of international law. Since breaking the ceasefire, abuses continue on a daily basis.



Burmese Army troops patrol in Shan State

Under the new 2008 Constitution, the Burmese Army is the only permitted armed organisation allowed in the country. Armed ethnic organisations with ceasefire agreements took part in the National Convention, which drafted the principles of the Constitution. Every single one of their proposals which would grant some level of autonomy to ethnic states, and protection for ethnic rights and culture, were rejected by the dictatorship. Instead they were told to join the Burmese Army or face military attack.

The breaking of the ceasefire with Shan State Army – North on 13th March is the third time in the past two years the dictatorship has broken a ceasefire agreement. It is also threatening to break all other ceasefire agreements. This would lead to large-scale conflict from Mon State, Karen State, and Karenni State, to Shan State and Kachin State. The armed ethnic organisations are prepared to negotiate for political solutions, but the dictatorship refuses to enter into genuine dialogue. The result of more ceasefire agreements being broken would be a major humanitarian crisis and a massive escalation in human rights abuses against civilians, as the Burmese Army targets civilians in conflict.

Burma Campaign UK has called on the British government to publicly condemn the dictatorship in Burma for breaking ceasefire agreements with ethnic organisations in Burma, including breaking the ceasefire with the Shan State Army – North.

“The British government should have the same robust policy towards attacks against civilians in Shan State, Burma, as it has with Libya and Syria,” said Anna Roberts, Executive Director of Burma Campaign UK. “Shan women are being gang-raped, villages mortar bombed, and villagers used as slave labour. The British government should immediately condemn these attacks, and mobilise the international community to work for a nationwide ceasefire in Burma.”

Burma Campaign UK has published a new briefing paper, Crisis in Shan State, to highlight the current crisis. Available at: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/crisis-in-shan-state>

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EU maintains Burma sanctions

EU Foreign Ministers met on 12 April to decide on the joint foreign policy on Burma. The Council Decision on EU Burma policy has to be renewed once a year. Ministers agreed to maintain sanctions and there were no major changes.

Germany and Italy had been using the pretext of the sham elections and release of Aung San Suu Kyi to try to persuade the EU to lift economic sanctions on Burma. Germany in particular has companies wanting to expand their business in Burma.

The EU agreed two new measures which they hope will promote dialogue with the dictatorship. The ban on EU ministers and heads of state visiting Burma has been lifted temporarily, for one year.

Burma Campaign UK has long called for higher level political engagement with the dictatorship in Burma. Twenty years experience has shown that sending low-level envoys from the UN, EU and other countries does not work. However, given that the EU is already sending conflicting messages to the dictatorship, if twenty-seven different ministers start visiting Burma, this problem will only get worse. The EU must agree common talking points to ensure consistency of messages. Burma Campaign UK understands that all EU ministers will visit Aung San Suu Kyi each time they go to Burma.

The EU has also made small changes to the visa ban list. Civilian members of the dictatorship have been added to the visa ban list as usual, but the implementation of this will be suspended for the time being. The Foreign Minister of Burma has had implementation of the visa ban suspended for one year, again to promote dialogue.

The EU should now engage with the National League for Democracy to set benchmarks, such as the release of all political prisoners, which must be met before any economic sanctions are lifted.

Arrested for 'national reconciliation' email

Nay Myo Zin, a former army captain, was arrested at the beginning of April while on his way to a hospital to donate blood with an NLD youth group. He is reportedly being held in Insein Prisoner under the Electronics Act because he was found to have an email in his inbox which included a phrase about national reconciliation.

The Electronics Act has frequently been used to imprison political activists, including many 88 Generation Students leaders such as Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi.

Political prisoners continue to suffer the consequences of inhumane living conditions. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, at least 159 political prisoners are in poor health due to the denial of proper medical care, harsh prison conditions, torture and transfers to remote prisons where there are no doctors.

In the case of Ko Min Aung, a member of the NLD, this tactic is having a devastating impact on his health as he has been denied urgent medical treatment for heart disease for over 11 months. He is being held in Kale prison, Sagaing division, 800 miles from his home.

The military regime routinely sends political prisoners to prisons far away from their families, despite the existence of prisons much closer to their homes, making it more difficult and expensive for families to visit and provide support. This is a strategy employed by the regime to try and break the spirit of political prisoners.

Six months after Cyclone Giri, survivors still struggling

Cyclone Giri hit Arakan State, in Western Burma on 22 October last year. The storm caused significant damage and destruction to homes, public buildings and infrastructure and affected around 260,000 people. It is estimated the cyclone completely destroyed 20,000 homes. Six months after the disaster, many are still left with inadequate shelter and struggling to make ends meet.

In an interview with The Irrawaddy, one villager from Pyaychaung, in Myebon Township, one of the worst-affected villages, said: "We eat whatever we can get and do random jobs everyday for our survival. When heavy rain falls, we gather at a house that is still in relatively good condition. But at the moment, only five of the 230 houses in our village are in good shape."

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), an estimated 104,000 people are still living with host families in the worst-affected townships. 90 percent of all rice fields have been damaged in Myebon and people are struggling to rebuild their livelihoods.

Democratic Voice of Burma reported in April that MPs had been blocked from conducting fact-finding missions in the region. Pe Than from the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) said that although he had checked with officials prior to setting out on a recent trip to meet with local villagers, he was forced to return by the Myebon township chairman who claimed there was "no permission from superior authorities".

US nominates new Burma envoy

President Obama has nominated Derek Mitchell to be the US Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma. The position was created by the United States Congress more than two years ago with the Tom Lantos Block Burma Jade Act of 2008 (the Jade Act) and holds the rank of ambassador. The Senate will now have to confirm the nomination.

The US Special Representative and Policy Coordinator is tasked to promote a comprehensive international effort, including multilateral sanctions, direct dialogue with Burma's regime and democracy forces and consult with the European Union, ASEAN, Burma's neighbouring countries and regional powers.

Derek Mitchell is currently Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs at the Department of Defense.



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**for Human Rights, Democracy
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