



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

DEC
2009

UN General Assembly calls on Burma to stop breaking International Law

On 24 December, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution condemning the regime's human rights abuses and calling on the dictatorship to stop breaking international law.

The resolution expresses grave concern "at the major and repeated violations of international humanitarian law committed against civilians" and "strongly calls upon the Government of Myanmar to take urgent measures to put an end to the military operations targeting civilians in the ethnic areas, and to the associated violations of human rights and humanitarian law against persons belonging to ethnic nationalities, to end the systematic forced displacement of large numbers of persons and other causes of refugee flows to neighbouring countries and to respect existing ceasefire agreements."

The resolution also called on the regime to immediately release all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi and urged the junta to undertake a transparent and inclusive review of its 2008 constitution.

US: No progress in Burma

Following the US policy review toward Burma, which maintains sanctions but also recommends political pressure and dialogue, two senior US diplomats, Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, and his deputy, Scot Marciel, visited Burma in November. They met numerous regime officials, as well as meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD representatives. However, they were not allowed to meet regime leader Than Shwe.

So far the regime appears not to be responding positively to the offer of engagement by the USA and the US has admitted that there are no signs of progress towards democratic change in Burma yet. "It's perhaps useful that we are talking, but that isn't progress," Scot Marciel said. "Progress will come when there's change on the ground in Burma. So far, there's been none," he added.

442 MPs call for UN Commission of Inquiry into Crimes against Humanity

On 10 December, a global letter from 442 MPs from 29 countries called on the UN Security Council to create a Commission of Inquiry to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma, as well as to impose a global arms embargo on Burma's military regime.

A recent report by Harvard Law School found that human rights abuses in Burma are widespread, systematic, and part of state policy, suggesting

Burma's military regime may be committing crimes against humanity and war crimes prosecutable under international law.

US citizen in solitary confinement

There are growing concerns for the health of Kyaw Zaw Lwin, a US citizen and well-known democracy activist. Kyaw Zaw Lwin, also known as Nyi Nyi Aung, was arrested by the Burmese authorities on



September 3 2009, when he was attempting to visit his mother, an imprisoned democracy activist who has cancer. He is currently on trial and could face up to 14 years in jail.

It is reported that he was brutally tortured during interrogation. He has been held in solitary confinement in a military dog cell for extended periods after ending a 12-day hunger strike in protest at conditions for political prisoners.

Farmers in ILO case sentenced

In December two farmers involved in a land dispute in Burma which was taken up by the ILO were given seven-year prison sentences. The two farmers had brought complaints to the ILO after the Burmese army confiscated their land in 2007. Following the

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ILO intervention, the land was returned earlier this year. However, in August the two farmers were accused of cutting down a eucalyptus tree on the land and arrested. The arrests are widely viewed to be retribution for the farmers' involvement with the ILO.

The ILO has acknowledged that, despite having an agreement with the Burmese government that complainants will not be harassed, there is a risk of retribution. In October, 12 farmers who filed complaints to the ILO regarding land confiscation were sentenced to up to five years with hard labour.

“Gullible Gambari” moves on

On 2 December, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon announced that Ibrahim Gambari will be stepping down as UN Special Advisor on Burma. UN Chief of Staff Vijay Nambiar is the acting envoy to Burma until an official replacement is confirmed.

Gambari was widely viewed as gullible and incompetent. When Gambari first visited Burma in May 2006, he declared that the regime had turned a new page with the international community. Since then, the human rights situation in Burma has deteriorated dramatically. Campaigners have called on the United Nations to abandon its softly softly approach to Burma and apply real pressure on the regime to enter into genuine tri-partite dialogue.

“Burma’s Children, a Generation Sacrificed”

The International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC) has released a new report, ‘Burma’s Children, a Generation Sacrificed’, highlighting the devastating impact of human rights abuses, including trade union rights, on children in Burma.



Burma’s military dictatorship spends over 40% of the state budget on the army, but just 0.9% on education and 0.5% on health, one of the lowest spending levels in the world. As a result, less

than 55% of Burmese children complete primary school education. Millions of Burmese children cannot afford school, and are forced into begging, prostitution and work in hazardous conditions. Every day hundreds of thousands work for long hours, sometimes in forced labour. The forced recruitment of child soldiers is still frequent.

One 11 year old child interviewed in the report talked about their job in a tea room in Rangoon: “I work 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, for a salary of 8.60 dollars a month. Other children only earn 6 dollars a month. My boss gives me two meals a day and I can sleep in a small room, but there are a lot of us all squeezed into one very hot room. I am always tired during the day because I don’t sleep enough.”

Burma to buy Russian fighter planes

Russia has signed a contract to deliver 20 MiG-29 fighter planes to Burma in a deal worth 570 million US dollars. Russia is a significant arms supplier to the Burmese regime. In 2001 the regime used its first down-payment for gas exports from Total’s gas project to buy 10 MiG jets from Russia.

Opium cultivation in Burma increases

The United Nations’ Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) latest report opium poppy cultivation in South-East Asia reveals that opium poppy production in Burma has risen by almost 50% since 2006 and has increased by 11% from a year ago

Total linked to killings and forced labour in Burma

French oil giant Total continues to be linked to killings and forced labour in Burma and continues to mislead policymakers, investors, and the general public about its impact in Burma, according to EarthRights International (ERI).

In September 2009, ERI published two reports linking Total and its Yadana partners, Chevron, the Petroleum Authority of Thailand Exploration and Production (PTTEP), and the state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), to widespread and systematic human rights abuses in the area of its natural gas project in the Tennaserim region of Burma.

The reports document years of testimonies from local victims of abuses in Total’s project area, committed by the Burma Army providing security for the companies and the pipeline. Total has denied ERI’s findings, but ERI has released a new report detailing how Total has failed to refute any of ERI’s fresh evidence of forced labour and killings.

“In the last few years we’ve documented hundreds of instances of forced labour ordered by the Burma Army securing Total’s pipeline, and the cases are continuing,” says ERI Program Coordinator Naing Htoo, a co-author of the ERI reports. “The company has in effect kept complaints of forced labour from reaching the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other parties, and that raises serious questions,” he added.

Chinese dam launch “celebrated”

On 21 December, hundreds of local villagers were forced to attend an official “celebration” ceremony to launch the construction of the Myitsone dam on the Irrawaddy River in Kachin State. The event was attended by officials from the two dam construction contractors, Burma’s Asia World Company and China’s state-owned China Power Investment Corporation (CPI), as well as regime officials.

The Myitsone hydropower project is the first of seven hydropower projects in Kachin State. When completed, the Myitsone dam will generate an estimated 3,600 megawatts of electricity.

The construction of the dam is likely to displace about 15,000 people in total. As well as displacement, dam projects in Burma also lead to increased military presence, human rights abuses, and irreversible environmental damage.

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