

Military dominate key government positions

Than Shwe to lead 'State Supreme Council'

In February, the new President, Vice-Presidents and Ministers were appointed to the government. Former Prime Minister Thein Sein was appointed as Burma's new president. Thein Sein resigned his military position last year to head the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and is known to be very loyal to Burma's dictator Senior-General Than Shwe.

Three military generals were appointed by Than Shwe to the powerful ministerial posts of Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. Out of 30 members of the new government only four have no military background and there is not a single woman in the government. The parliament is dominated by pro-regime parties and soldiers.

The first sessions of the new parliament have reinforced perceptions that MPs won't have any real power. A Rangoon journalist, speaking to The Irrawaddy said, "for the past ten days, most Hluttaw (Parliament) meetings have lasted just 15 minutes. So now people have started calling it the 15-minute Hluttaw." In his first speech as the Upper House speaker on 31 January, ex-Maj-Gen Khin Aung Myint urged MPs not to debate, but to "discuss any matters in unison."

Real power will lie with two other bodies. The new National Defense and Security Council (NDSC), which is comprised of the President, two Vice Presidents, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Vice Commander-in-Chief, and the Ministers of Defence, Home, Foreign Affairs and Border Affairs. With the exception of Vice-President Sai Mauk Kham, every member of the NDSC is a military officer or former officer.

And, in an unexpected move, Than Shwe has revealed that he will personally lead a new body called the 'State Supreme Council', which was not even mentioned in the 2008 Constitution. This Council looks set to become the most powerful body in the country.

Both the State Supreme Council and the NDSC will have powers that supersede the powers of the new parliament.

Burma Regime rejects 16 Requests at UN for Crimes Investigations

Burma's dictatorship rejected 16 separate proposals made at the United Nations Human Rights Council calling on the dictatorship to respect international law and investigate breaches of international law.

The recommendations were made by members of the Human Rights Council as part of the Universal Periodic Review into human rights in Burma, which takes place every four years.



Senior-General Than Shwe

The continued refusal of the dictatorship to commit to obeying international law, and to investigate human rights abuses which violate international law, places increased pressure on members of the United Nations to establish a UN inquiry into possible war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma. The UN's own Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Burma has repeatedly called for such an investigation.

The dictatorship in Burma has also ignored 18 separate requests for investigations made in UN General Assembly resolutions. A new Constitution about to come into force in Burma also grants immunity to members of the dictatorship for any crimes they have committed.

A total of 190 recommendations were made to the dictatorship in Burma. The dictatorship accepted or claimed it has already implemented 74 of these, despite clear evidence that in many cases this is completely false. 70 recommendations were rejected outright, and a further 46 were under consideration.

NLD reviews Burma sanctions

The National League for Democracy has conducted a review of sanctions, looking in detail at the impact of economic sanctions on ordinary people in Burma. They have concluded that it is the policies of the dictatorship, not sanctions, which are causing economic hardship. Some countries which support the lifting of sanctions have tried to claim sanctions hurt ordinary people. The NLD has rejected this.

In the statement, the NLD calls for progress on human rights and democracy in order for sanctions to be lifted and sets the release of all political prisoners as a critical benchmark before lifting sanctions: "As the major causes of sanctions are violations of human rights and lack of democratic practices, it is by dealing effectively with these issues that the removal of sanctions can best be effected. The release of all political prisoners is a critical requirement."

The NLD has called for meetings with those countries which have sanctions, in order to agree on which circumstances would lead to a modification of sanctions. Setting clear benchmarks on what improvements in human rights and steps towards democracy would be required before sanctions are lifted would be a welcome step. At present some countries have argued that the fake election and release of Aung San Suu Kyi are reason enough to lift some sanctions. The NLD has rejected this. They argue that attempts to confine political activity to the Parliamentary system following the elections 'reduces democratization in Burma to a parody'.

Commenting on the Policy Statement, NLD Vice-Chairman U Tin Oo has stated: "We would urge the countries that are helping Burma's democratic movement to maintain their targeted sanctions. There is no tangible progress toward Burma's democratic reforms."

Burma Campaign UK has called on members of the

European Union to maintain targeted sanctions on Burma, following the release of a policy statement on sanctions by the National League for Democracy (NLD).

The European Union has a 'Common Decision' on Burma foreign policy, which has to be renewed every April. Some European countries, including Italy and Germany, are believed to favour relaxing some sanctions.

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

New Ethnic Alliance formed

In February, in direct response to the increased threats from the dictatorship to impose its new constitution on ethnic groups, a new military alliance and political coalition was created, the United Nationalities Federal Council (Union of Burma).

The new coalition is made up of 15 organisations, some which have ceasefire agreements, and some which do not. This new alliance could field between 40,000 to 80,000 soldiers, according to various estimates. Members have pledged to defend each other if attacked, and also agreed to explore how to establish a single military command structure.

Under Burma's new constitution, armed ethnic groups on ceasefire have to place themselves under the control of the Burmese Army, as Border Guard Forces. The dictatorship has threatened them with military force if they refuse.

In signs of growing tension in ethnic ceasefire areas, on 4th February Burmese State-owned media made the significant step of describing the ceasefire group the New Mon State Party as an insurgent group, rather than a ceasefire group. On 7th February, fighting broke out between the Burmese Army and the Kachin Independence Army, with eight Burmese Army soldiers reportedly injured or killed.

Increase in UK aid to Burma

The British government has announced that it is set to double the amount of UK aid to Burma. Burma Campaign UK has been lobbying the British government to continue increasing aid to Burma, which was a commitment of the previous Labour government, and which had been supported by the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats while in opposition.

When Burma Campaign UK first began lobbying for increased aid to Burma, the budget was just £8

million a year. In four years time, it will rise to over £50 million per year.

Poverty in Burma is caused by the dictatorship, and while humanitarian aid can help alleviate some of the symptoms of the dictatorship, it is vital that the causes are addressed as well. It is, therefore, very welcome that DFID will increase funding for civil society organisations. However, to date most DFID funding in this area has been through organisations officially registered with the dictatorship. These organisations face strict limitations on what they can do, so it is important that DFID also fund informal organisations, and organisations which are based in exile. Although not based in Burma, they run underground networks throughout the country. As they are based in exile, they have more freedom to provide certain types of training and support to underground networks.

Burma Campaign UK would also like to see DFID significantly increase aid for food and shelter for refugees on the Thailand Burma border. More than 150,000 refugees from Burma are in refugee camps in Thailand, most having fled attacks by the Burmese Army. These refugees are currently facing ration cuts and other cuts in support because of the withdrawal of funding by the European Commission, and rising food prices and currency fluctuations. DFID should at least triple its annual support for these refugees, which currently stands at just over £1 million.

DFID should also step up funding for cross-border aid into ethnic areas where the dictatorship blocks registered humanitarian groups from delivering assistance. Cross-border aid, where people from the affected communities cross into neighbouring countries to collect aid and return to their communities with it, is the only way to reach many of the most vulnerable people in the country.

Burma Campaign UK cautioned that DFID must continue to avoid channelling aid through the dictatorship, as the danger of the dictatorship stealing or misusing aid would undermine public support for increasing aid.

Belgium supports a UN Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma

Belgium has become the 14th country to officially support a UN Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma.

In his declaration to the Federal Parliament, Mr Steven Van Ackere, Foreign Affairs Minister, stated that, "Belgium recognised the merits of creating,

at the appropriate time, such a commission ...

The proposal to establish a Commission of Inquiry into War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, recommended by the Quinoa Report, must therefore, logically be included into this process."

Actions Birmanie welcomed the support, saying "There is abundant proof of the possible crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Burmese generals, and these crimes occur increasingly. The time has come for these (crimes) to be investigated, in order to put an end to the culture of impunity, which feeds on a daily basis the oppression in Burma."

Global Day of Action for 34 Resistance Fighters from Burma in Indian Jail



Demonstration in front of High Commission of India, London.

On 11 February, 38 organisations in 18 countries took part in a global day of action in support of 34 resistance fighters from Burma who are currently being held in an Indian jail. The 34 are threatened with deportation back to Burma, where they would very likely face arrest, torture and imprisonment.

The thirty-four were arrested 13 years ago, on 11th February 1998, on Landfall Island, by the Indian Military. They appear to have been tricked by a rogue Indian Military intelligence official, who had told them they could land there with the permission and support of the military. Although initially accused of gun-running, these charges were dropped, and last year a plea bargain was agreed in which they were told that each of them had to pay a six-thousand rupee fine, and given a three year sentence, which has already been served while waiting for, and during, the trial.

These thirty-four resistance fighters never intentionally broke any Indian law. Now, even though their case is over, and they have paid their fine and served the time they were given, they are still in jail.

The thirty-four come from two ethnic nationalities in Burma, they are Arakanese and Karen. Both of these ethnic groups face persecution from the dictatorship ruling Burma. As members of two banned organisations, the National United Party of Arakan, and the Karen National Union, they would face arrest, torture and imprisonment if they were forced to return to Burma.

A briefing on the case is available at:
<http://burmacampaign.org.uk/images/uploads/8-34-Freedom-Fighters-in-India.pdf>

Rohingya refugees pushed out to sea by Thailand

At least 91 Rohingya refugees were reportedly pushed out to sea in January 2011 in an engineless boat with limited food and water by Thai authorities. They spent nearly two weeks at sea before being rescued by Indian police near the Andaman and Nicobar islands in early February.

The Rohingya ethnic minority are one of the most oppressed ethnic groups in Burma.

In late 2008 and early 2009, Thai security forces pushed hundreds of Rohingyas to sea in unseaworthy boats. Some subsequently died at sea.

Brighton Festival supports Burma with Guest Director Aung San Suu Kyi

Brighton Festival, the largest international arts festival in England, has announced that Aung San Suu Kyi is Guest Director of this year's festival. Aung San Suu Kyi's call to 'Use your liberty to promote ours' has been taken to the heart of the Brighton Festival, with artists, both local and international, presenting a powerful and wide-ranging programme celebrating liberty and freedom of expression.

Throughout the festival there will be a series of events which raise awareness about Burma and the struggle for freedom, including the powerful play *The Lady of Burma* and a reading from the autobiography of Zoya Phan, Burma Campaign UK's Campaigns Manager.

The festival is from May 7th – May 29th 2011. For details of events, visit www.brightonfestival.org



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**for Human Rights, Democracy
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