



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

JAN
2010

2000 Karen villagers forced to flee Burma Army attacks

More than 2000 Karen villagers have been forced to flee their homes following attacks by the Burma Army, according to the Free Burma Rangers (FBR), a relief organisation working in the conflict zones of eastern Burma. At least four villagers were shot and one body has been found decapitated. FBR reports say these recent attacks began when two villagers were shot in Keh Der village on 17 January in Ler Doh Township and ten houses were burned down.



Despite the thousands more displaced in Eastern Burma in January, the Thai government appears to be planning to forcibly return to Burma 3,000 Karen refugees that fled to Thailand in June 2009 to escape fighting. If forced to return to Burma, the refugees face possible death, slave labour or forced recruitment as soldiers. The area in Karen State where the refugees would be made to return to has many landmines. In addition, the area is now under the control of the DKBA, an organisation allied to the military dictatorship, which is guilty of committing horrific human rights abuses against civilians.

We can't dance alone: US to Burma

Kurt Campbell, a top US diplomat who visited Burma in November, has expressed frustration at the lack of response from Burma's leaders following recent diplomatic efforts.

Speaking at a Congressional briefing on 21 January, Campbell said: "We are attempting to take that first step...but I do want to underscore that one can't dance on the dance floor alone."

Campbell also said the administration's formal review of US policy towards Burma reaffirmed its fundamental goals: a democratic government that respects the rights of its people and is at peace with its neighbours.

"A policy of pragmatic engagement with the Burmese authorities holds the best hope for advancing our goals. Under this approach, US sanctions will remain in place until Burmese authorities demonstrate that they are prepared to make meaningful progress on US core concerns," he said. "The leaders of Burma's democratic opposition have confirmed to us their support for this approach."

Than Shwe promises 'Election' this year

On 4 January, in his Independence Day message, regime leader Than Shwe reiterated that elections would be held this year and warned voters "to make correct choices" and to "remain vigilant [...] against dangers posed by neocolonialists."



However, no specific date has been given for the election.

Burma's democracy movement, and ethnic groups have universally rejected the elections and new constitution in their current form.

Junta sells off State-owned properties

The regime has announced that it is selling more than 100 state-owned buildings and factories as part of the latest wave of privatizations. However, the main beneficiaries are likely to be the regime's families and business cronies, who are able to buy property at knockdown prices.

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“Their [the junta’s] track record is not good. Many state enterprises in the past have simply become private monopolies,” said Sean Turnell, an economist at Australia’s Macquarie University. “The great danger when states sell their assets is that they may sell them at ‘fire sale’ prices to their cronies. This danger is very real in Burma,” he said.

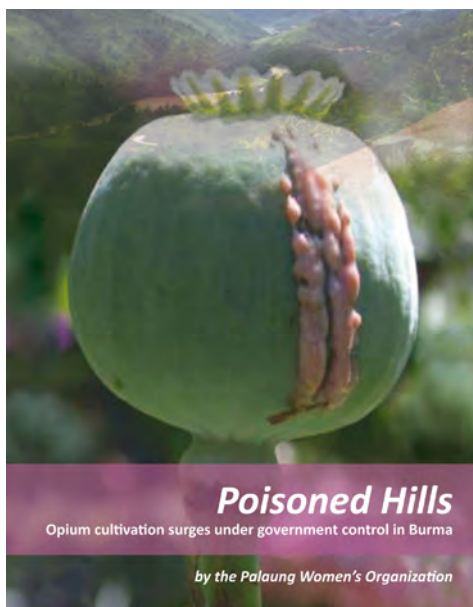
One of the biggest purchasers of state-owned properties last year was Tay Za, a well-known crony of the Burmese junta who has been targeted by sanctions. In December, he also won a major contract for construction of two dams for hydro-power plants.

Some observers believe the regime is trying to ensure that its economic interests are protected in the run-up to its planned elections through deals that put the control of key industries into the hands of its loyal business cronies. These economic policies are designed to allow the regime to maintain control over most of Burma’s wealth and resources.

Burma was ranked the fifth worst country in the world and second worst in Asia in a global survey on economic freedom. The “2010 Index of Economic Freedom”, published by the Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal in January, found that investment and business freedoms in Burma are “extraordinarily weak,” due to corruption, financial mismanagement and repressive regime interference.

Opium cultivation surging under junta’s control in Burma

A new report, ‘Poisoned Hills’ released by the Palaung Women’s Organization, reveals that opium cultivation in Burma’s northern Shan State has been increasing rapidly over the past three years in areas under the control of the ruling military government.



The report documents that areas under opium cultivation increased up to five-fold in Mantong and Namkham townships between 2006 and 2009 to almost 4,500 hectares. This is far higher than estimates in the annual opium surveys of the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime.

It also reveals that local authorities, army battalions and pro-government militia are profiting from “taxation” of opium farmers. Official “anti-drug teams”, instead of eradicating poppy fields, are extorting large sums from local farmers and leaving the crop intact.

Burma “Worst of the Worst” in freedom index

Freedom House, an organisation that monitors democracy and political rights world wide, has ranked Burma among the “Worst of the Worst” in its annual survey.

ILO extends forced labour monitoring mechanism

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has renewed its agreement with the regime for monitoring forced labour complaints for another year. The ILO first signed an agreement with Burma in 2007, but the ILO remains frustrated at the lack of progress on forced labour in Burma.

In November, the ILO criticised Burma for failing to abolish forced labour and for imprisoning victims of forced labour who have made complaints. It also said that if the situation is not promptly remedied, it will “examine potential legal implications of the failure to comply.”

Journalists receive long prison sentences

A journalist working for the Democratic Voice of Burma, Ngwe Soe Lin, also known as Tun Kyaw, was sentenced to 13 years in prison on 27 January. He was arrested him on 26 June 2009 in Rangoon and charged under Electronics and Immigration Acts, which is often used by the junta to imprison video reporters.

Ngwe Soe Lin played a vital role in recording the lives of children left orphaned by Cyclone Nargis in 2008. His work was used in a documentary, ‘Orphans of Burma’s Cyclone’, shown on Channel 4 in the UK and several other countries. Along with another DVB journalist named Zoro, he won the 2009 Rory Peck award for best documentary.

Ngwe Soe Linn is the second DVB journalist to be sentenced within a month. On 30 December 2009, DVB journalist, Hla Hla Win was sentenced to 27 years in jail. Hla Hla Win was first arrested

in September 2009, and in October was given a seven-year sentence. Then in December, she was given a further 20 years.

Burmese Junta worse than Nargis

On 21 January, the newly elected president of the human rights committee of the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) stated that human rights violations by the Burmese junta have caused more devastation than Cyclone Nargis and called for release of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and 13 elected opposition parliament members from prison.

Aquilino Pimentel, a Philippines senator and the new president, said "In the year 2008, Burma was hit by a terrible catastrophe, by cyclone Nargis, and because there was so much devastation people thought that was the worst thing that could happen to Burma. But actually it was not. It was rather the deprivation of the rights of the people by the ruling junta."

The IPU is an international organisation of parliaments established in 1889 that works for peace and democracy.

Cyclone Nargis hit the country on May 2, 2008. It caused catastrophic destruction and killed at least 138,000 people and left millions of people homeless.

Officials sentenced to death

Two Burmese officials have been sentenced to death for espionage after they were found guilty of leaking details of secret regime visits to North Korea and Russia, as well as information on the regime's tunnel project near the capital, Naypyidaw.

Ethnic leader assassinated

Min Ein, a leader of the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) based in Mongla, Shan State, Eastern Burma, was killed by unidentified gunmen on 27 January. The gunmen have not been arrested and no one has claimed responsibility. Some believe the regime may be behind the assassination as it increases pressure on ethnic ceasefire groups to become border guard forces.

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www.burmacampaign.org.uk tel: 020 7324 4710 fax: +44 20 7324 4717**



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