



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

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Burma's new parliament can't hold government to account

Burma's new Parliament convened for the first time on 31 January 2011 to choose a President and Vice-Presidents. A quarter of the seats in both the upper and lower houses are reserved for the military, and almost 80 percent of the remaining seats are held by the regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party. The parliament session was held behind closed doors as journalists and media were banned from covering news of the sessions.



The Parliament building in Naypyidaw

Burma Campaign UK called on the international community not to be fooled by cosmetic changes by Burma's dictatorship.

"This Parliament is packed with soldiers, ex-soldiers, pro-regime parties, corrupt businessmen and stooges," said Zoya Phan, Campaigns Manager at Burma Campaign UK. "The tiny number of genuine pro-democracy MPs are massively outnumbered, but even if they were in the majority, they still couldn't bring human rights and democracy to Burma, as the Parliament doesn't have real power, the military does."

"Those arguing that over the long term Parliament could be a forum for political change are in fact depending on a single factor, that at some point the Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services will decide to hand over power. The military have made it very clear they have no intention of handing over power. They have just introduced a new constitution specifically written to keep them in power, and human rights abuses continue."

More details on the Parliament are available in a Burma Campaign UK briefing at: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/burmas-fake-election>

Woman and children injured by mortar shelling on Thai-Burma Border

A mother and two young boys from Karen State seeking refuge in Thailand were seriously injured by shrapnel from mortars that landed across the Thai-Burma border on 30 January. They had been hiding in the jungle in Thailand, near to the border, to avoid having to return to their villages in areas where there are on-going attacks by the Burmese Army.

They were among a group of approximately 1,500 villagers who were hiding near the Moei River on the Thai side of the border when fighting erupted. 49 mortar shells exploded on the Thai side of the river, near the hiding sites.

More than 10,000 civilians are currently hiding in Thailand following a new Burmese Army military offensive in Karen State, along the Thailand Burma

border on 8 November 2010, just one day after the sham elections.



Villagers flee across the river into Thailand

Since then, the Burmese Army has been attacking villages in areas thought to be under the control of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)

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faction that has refused to become a Border Guard Force under the control of the Burmese Army. Under Burma's new constitution, armed ethnic groups which have been on ceasefire have to place themselves under the control of the Burmese Army, as Border Guard Forces.

Temporary refugee sites were initially set up in Thailand in November to deal with the immediate surge of civilians fleeing from fighting. However, there is concern that the Thai government is forcing these civilians to return to unsafe situations across the border. Villagers have been told to leave the sites when there are temporary lulls in the fighting in Karen State, but military attacks have continued for nearly three months, and show no sign of abating.

Prisoners used as slave labour

New evidence reveals that the Burmese Army has been using prisoners as forced labourers to carry equipment for troops in Karen state.

In an interview with Burma Campaign UK, one of the prisoners, who escaped to Thailand from a military camp in Karen State, described how the Burmese Army used prisoners as human minesweepers and had witnessed other prisoners who had been blown up by landmines as they tried to escape.

Democratic Voice of Burma also confirmed the story in an interview with a prisoner from Pakokku prison, Magwe Division, who was among 800 prisoners assigned to the Army's Palaw Tapo Camp in Myawaddy Township, Karen State. He said "The army unit that brought us made us work like animals: our legs were shackled and we were not allowed to relieve ourselves or rear our heads without permission. We had to sleep in crammed sleeping quarters. We cannot take care of our personal hygiene. We cannot walk properly because of the shackles."

United Nations Court condemns Burma's Regime for arbitrary detentions

In January, the United Nations Working Group of Arbitrary Detention ruled that the imprisonment of leading democracy activist Ko Mya Aye was arbitrary and in breach of the rights accorded to all citizens under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The court took the further step of reminding the Burmese authorities that in repeated cases before it, the court had expressed its view that the Burmese Government had not complied with its obligations under international law and that no revision and review of these illegal detentions had taken place. The court urged immediate compliance.

The case was brought by Sappho Dias, Adam

Zellick and Jared Genser, who are members of the Burma Justice Committee. Ko Mya Aye is a leading member of the pro-democracy group the "88 Generation". Following the peaceful protests of monks and citizens, Ko Mya Aye was arrested on 22nd August 2007. He was held incommunicado and denied contact with his immediate family and access to a lawyer. On 11th November 2008, he was sentenced to 65 years and 6 months in prison.



Ko Mya Aye is suffering from heart disease but has no access to a cardiologist. He is being held in a prison which is over 500 miles away from Rangoon, making it difficult for his family to visit him and there are serious concerns for his health.

Burma's 'privatization' keeps military and cronies in control

Burma's military is continuing its 'privatization' of state assets, reportedly selling up to 90% of state assets.

According to the Irrawaddy, the privatization process, which started in 2008, is now 70% complete and will be accelerated in the coming months. Last year, the regime sold 110 economic enterprises, 32 buildings, 246 gas stations, and jetties along the Rangoon River and in port areas to private companies.

However, many observers believe it is part of the military's effort to maintain its hold on power, transferring assets to corporations run by the military or its business cronies.

Buyers of state assets include military-run corporations such as Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings and the Myanmar Economic Corporation, the two major industrial conglomerates controlled by the military, as well as business cronies of the regime.

Speaking on Voice of America, Debbie Stothard, from Altsean Burma, said, "The wave of privatization that has taken place has been a move to transform

public assets into personal property of the military regime and their cronies, including the leaders of the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which is the biggest party backing the regime.”

Alison Vicary, an economist from Macquarie University, Australia, said, “That whole fire sale of assets that they had prior to the election was to shore up support of some of the big entrepreneurs. The airport, for example, was given to those entrepreneurs that have been aligned with the regime for years.”

Many of the large Burmese corporations that have bought assets, such as the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings and Tay Za of the Htoo Company, are on the US sanctions blacklist.

Khun Hte Bu Peh, Chairman of the Karenni National Progressive Party, dies

Khun Hte Bu Peh, Chairman of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), passed away on the afternoon of the 27th January 2011.

Khun Hte Bu Peh led the KNPP with wisdom and determination during difficult and challenging times for the Karenni people and the whole of Burma. He had also served as Chair of the Ethnic Nationalities Council.

Khun Hte Bu Peh worked for greater unity between ethnic groups and the democracy movement, and was widely respected. He had also called for stronger international action on Burma, most recently offering KNPP’s support and cooperation for a UN Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma.

New Burma Briefing: Support for a United Nations Commission of Inquiry

Burma Campaign UK has published a new Burma Briefing detailing the growing international support for a UN Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma.

In March 2010 Tomas Ojea Quintana, current UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, called for the establishment of a UN Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma.

The Briefing is available here:

<http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/support-for-a-united-nations-commission-of-inquiry>



Khun Hte Bu Peh, KNPP Chairman, (2nd left) with Zoya Phan, Campaigns Manager at Burma Campaign UK, Day Day Paw, wife of Khun Hte Bu Peh, Bwa Bwa Phan, UK Representative of Karen National Union, March 2008.

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