

Thain Sein visits UK and France

At the beginning of July, Burma's President Thein Sein made his first visit to the UK and France. In London, Thein Sein met David Cameron in Downing Street. He also had meetings with the Foreign Secretary William Hague, the Defence Minister, the Development Minister, the Business Secretary and Investment Minister and representatives from British companies.

The British government downplayed the visit with domestic media, apparently fearful of criticisms over their ever-closer ties with the military-backed government in Burma and their willingness to dismiss or play down human rights abuses. Despite all the on-going serious human rights abuses in Burma, the British government is prioritising trade and investment and is moving closer to Thein Sein, even offering closer ties with the military.

The British government did raise human rights issues in meetings, but failed to secure any new concrete commitments on improving human rights. They did announce the creation of a Financial Services Taskforce to support Burma's financial services sector.

In France, Thein Sein's meetings included with President Francois Hollande and business leaders.

Given the scale of the on-going human rights abuses in Burma and the lack of any justice or accountability, many campaign groups criticised governments' red carpet welcome for Thein Sein and their failure to challenge him about serious human rights abuses that continue to be committed. Everywhere he went during the visit, Thein Sein was followed by people with 'Wanted' posters.

Burma Campaign UK has produced briefing papers on Thein Sein, including his decades-long involvement in human rights abuses in Burma, available on our website:

www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing



Protests against Thein Sein's UK visit at 10 Downing Street, led by the Kachin community.

More Political Prisoners released but peaceful activists arrested

On 23 July, 73 political prisoners were released, including Brang Shawng, who was highlighted as a political prisoner of the month in our No Political Prisoner Left Behind campaign. Ethnic Shan and Kachin prisoners were among the other political prisoners released.

However, it is now more than two years into Thein Sein's reform process and there is still no end in sight on the issue of political prisoners.

There has been a succession of prisoner releases but more activists continue to be arrested. The issue of political prisoners is like a revolving door, as some political prisoners are released, new activists are arrested. The harassment, arrest and detention of activists has continued throughout Burma and in June, 70 activists and farmers were facing trial and 17 others sentenced.

In early July, activist Aung Soe was sentenced to an additional 10 years in prison. Aung Soe is a member of the Rangoon Civil Assistance Network,

which promotes civil rights in Burma. He was arrested for his part organising protests with farmers to plough the land which had been confiscated by the Burmese government for the Letpadaung copper mine project. He had earlier been sentenced to one and a half years in prison.

His trial was closed without any lawyer allowed to defend his case. He is serving his prison sentences in Shwe Bo prison in central Burma, which is more than 480 miles away from his family in Rangoon.

New publishing bill ignores journalists' calls for media freedom

Journalists have voiced strong concerns over a new Printing and Publishing Enterprise bill that has been passed by Burma's Lower House of Parliament. The bill quashes recent hopes for greater media freedom within the country, with the pre-publication censorship system carried out by government officials ending last year, and the arrival of privately run daily newspapers for the first time in five decades.

However, suggested proposals by journalists have been ignored, and the bill will not only ensure the Ministry of Information retains the authority to issue and revoke publishing licences, but notably also bans any criticism of Burma's undemocratic 2008 Constitution. Some penalties for journalists have been removed, but publishers could be summoned to court and fined up to US\$10,000 for such ambiguous offenses as "disturbing the law" and "inciting unrest".

Critics are concerned the bill's vague wording will be easily abused by the military-backed government, and that it will simply result in self-censorship by newspapers to replace the pre-publication censorship by officials. Previously imprisoned journalist Zaw Thet Htwe, from Burma's Press Council, expressed his anger that the Ministry of Information hadn't kept "their promise to fix the points that violate our freedom."

Feared border guard force NaSaKa disbanded

NaSaKa, the notorious Burmese security force established in 1992 by the military junta to guard the border between Arakan state and neighbouring Bangladesh, and control the movement and population growth of the stateless Rohingya minority, has been disbanded.

Whilst no official explanation has been given, Human Rights Watch has reported that the US government had been planning to impose sanctions on the border force, which has been accused of

numerous human rights abuses including forced labour, rapes and killings. However, human rights activists have cautioned against assuming the group's abolition will improve the situation for the Rohingya, suggesting the apparent 'reform' could be a PR move by a government facing international criticism for its treatment of the minority group.

"If they are all replaced by Rakhine police it could become even worse", states Chris Lewa, Director of the Arakan Project which lobbies for the rights of the Rohingya. Moreover, there are concerns that the Burmese government may actually be seeking to install a more aggressive security force, through a belief that the NaSaKa had become 'soft' and corrupt.

No plans to revise 1982 Citizenship Law

President Thein Sein has ruled out amending the discriminatory citizenship law, which denies citizenship to the Rohingya. Speaking at Chatham House in London on 15 June, Thein Sein said: "There is currently no proposal to amend the 1982 Citizenship law and the parliament does not have any plan, as yet."

Thein Sein added, "To use the term Rohingya, in our ethnic history we do not have the term Rohingya."

Petition to limit mixed faith marriages

A petition calling for a proposed law to restrict marriages between Buddhist women and Muslim men appears to be gathering strength. Extremist Buddhist monk U Wirathu, who has been leading the campaign, has estimated that around 2.5 million people have signed the petition. U Wirathu is a monk who has gained notoriety by spreading anti-Muslim propaganda in Burma.

However, according to reports in The Irrawaddy magazine, it seems that not everyone who signed the petition was clear about the details of the proposal:

"I don't know about the law," Ma Htay Htay, a woman signing her name at a campaign booth in Mandalay told the Irrawaddy. "I heard songs playing [from the booth] about protecting Burmese women, so I came here to sign."

The National Democratic Front (NDF), a political party that split from the National League for Democracy to take part in the elections in 2010, is planning to submit a draft law restricting interfaith marriage to Parliament.

Burma Campaign UK has received unconfirmed reports that marriage restrictions in draft proposals for the law would also apply to Christians.

Land confiscation protests continue

Burma's defence minister announced in parliament in July that the military would return just 18,300 (or 6.1%) of the 297,000 acres of land it confiscated across Burma during the military dictatorship.

Land confiscation remains a major problem. Farmers across Burma are campaigning for the return of their confiscated land and holding protests against continued land confiscation.

A report by the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) last year said that, "Almost daily, news media carry reports of people being forced out of their houses or losing agricultural land to state-backed projects." According to the ALRC, the 2012 Farmland Law "opens the door to confiscation of agricultural land on any pretext associated with a state project or the 'national interest'."

New Briefings from Burma Campaign UK

Human Rights Abuses Since Thein Sein Became President

A review of the serious on-going human rights abuses in Burma. More than two years since Thein Sein became President, Burma still has one of the worst human rights records in the world.

www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/human-rights-abuses-since-thein-sein-became-president

Thein Sein - President of Burma

This briefing highlights Thein Sein's decades-long involvement in human rights abuses in Burma.

www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/thein-sein-president-of-burma

Thein Sein In His Own Words

This briefing provides revealing quotes, past and present, from Burma's President Thein Sein.

www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/thein-sein-in-his-own-words

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