



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

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Violence in Western Burma

In June horrific violence erupted in Rakhine (Arakan) State in Western Burma, leaving thousands of homes and businesses destroyed and many people dead.

On 3 June an estimated 300 Rakhine Buddhists attacked a bus carrying Muslim pilgrims. Ten people were beaten to death. The angry mob was allegedly reacting to news that a young Rakhine woman had been raped and murdered in late May by three Rohingya suspects. At the time of the attack, the suspects were reportedly in police custody.

The violence then escalated into rioting that spread to the state capital, Sittwe, and other townships. On 10 June President Thein Sein issued a state of emergency and sent Burmese Army troops to the area.

According to official government figures, 78 people have been killed, 87 injured and 3,000 residential buildings damaged or destroyed. However, the true figure of dead and injured is likely to be much higher. Information has been difficult to obtain as the government has denied or limited access to international journalists, aid workers, and diplomats.

The World Food Programme estimates about 90,000 people have been displaced and are in need of assistance as a result of the violence.

Chris Lewa, Co-ordinator of the Arakan Project, has said there are reports that the police and border forces (Nasaka) have been rounding up hundreds of young Rohingya men. There are also reports that at least twenty Rohingya women have been raped by Burmese soldiers.

The Rohingya are a persecuted Muslim minority in North Rakhine (Arakan) State in Burma, denied citizenship and subject to severe human rights abuses, including restrictions of movement and on permission to marry, arbitrary arrest and forced labour. They are widely viewed in Burma as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, despite the fact that Rohingya people have lived in Burma for generations.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burma, Tomás Ojea Quintana, warned that the violence in Rakhine state represents a serious threat to the country's future. "The underlying tensions that stem from discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities pose a threat to Myanmar's democratic transition and stability. I urge all sides to exercise restraint, respect the law and refrain from violence," he said.

Bangladesh has been condemned for closing its border and refusing to allow in hundreds of Rohingya who are fleeing the violence. Boatloads of men, women and children have been forced back out to sea by Bangladesh border guards.

Aung San Suu Kyi visits Europe

Aung San Suu Kyi made a three-week tour of Europe in June, visiting Switzerland, Norway, Ireland, UK and France. It was the first time she has been able to travel to Europe in 24 years. She was greeted by cheering crowds throughout her trip and held meetings with government leaders and politicians.

Speaking at the International Labour Organisation in Geneva, Aung San Suu Kyi called for "democracy-friendly human rights development growth" and warned potential investors against investing in the state-owned energy company MOGE while it lacks standards. She said, 'MOGE, the state-owned company under the Ministry of Energy with which

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all foreign participation in the energy sector takes place through joint-venture arrangements, lacks both transparency and accountability at present. The Government needs to apply internationally recognized standards, such as the IMF's Code of Good Practices on Fiscal Transparency. Other countries could help by not allowing their own companies to partner MOGE, unless it was signed up to such codes."

In Oslo, she was finally able to deliver her speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, which was awarded in 1991. In her speech, she called on the international community not to forget Burma's political prisoners. "One prisoner of conscience is one too many. Those who have not yet been freed, those who have not yet been given access to the benefits of justice in my country number much more than one. Please remember them and do whatever is possible to effect their earliest, unconditional release," she said.



Aung San Suu Kyi with the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Nobel Committee, at the Oslo City Hall. Copyright © Nobel Media AB 2012



Aung San Suu Kyi speaking in Westminster Hall. Copyright © Parliament - Catherine Bebbington

In the UK, Aung San Suu Kyi's 8-day visit included meetings with Prime Minister David Cameron, Foreign Secretary William Hague and leader of the opposition Ed Milliband, a speech in Westminster Hall to both Houses of Parliament, and collecting an honorary degree from Oxford University.

In her speech to Parliament, she welcomed Thein Sein's reforms so far but stressed the need to build strong democratic institutions and the importance of constitutional reform. She said, "the current constitution, drawn up by the military government in 2008, must be amended to incorporate the basic rights and aspirations of Burma's ethnic nationalities."

Burmese Army continues attacks one year after breaking Kachin ceasefire

19 June marked the one-year anniversary since fighting broke out in Kachin State following the Burmese Army's breaking of a 17-year ceasefire agreement with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). This past year has been marked by continuous and systematic human rights abuses committed by the Burmese Army against Kachin civilians which has resulted in over 75 000 people becoming internally displaced.

Despite several rounds of informal and formal talks between the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and government representatives, there has been no tangible progress towards a renewed ceasefire. Fighting continues on a near-daily basis and allegations of sexual violence committed by the Burmese Army against Kachin women, including the use of rape as weapon of war, continue to be reported.

For the several thousand Kachin refugees who have fled to Yunnan province in China, life remains marked by insecurity and struggle. According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, Kachin refugees are currently at risk of being forced to return to the conflict zone and lack desperately needed humanitarian aid. Despite its obligations under international law, the Chinese government has not provided any assistance to the Kachin refugees in Yunnan, and continues to bar international aid agencies from accessing the area.

This lack of humanitarian support has forced some Kachin refugees to return to their villages despite the extreme danger this entails. A 33-year-old Kachin woman said she felt compelled to return to her home in Kachin State because of the lack of food to feed her family in Yunnan: "What money we had brought [to Yunnan], we had already spent...It was difficult, so we had to come back to Burma."

One Kachin woman told Human Rights Watch: "As soon as we arrived [in China] there was no food so we just shared the little we had. The war will last a long time and make things very difficult for us. We are far away from the village and we cannot get food. Living here is a very difficult situation."

Coke announces investment in Burma

Coca-Cola has announced plans to begin doing business in Burma, saying that it will make “significant” investments across the country in the next three to five years. Coke also said that its charitable foundation would make a \$3 million investment to “to support women’s economic empowerment job creation initiatives throughout the country.”

Coca-Cola has not operated in Burma for more than 60 years. It is the first company to announce investment in Burma since US sanctions were lifted.

Call for UK to double refugee funding

Burma Campaign UK has called on Andrew Mitchell, Secretary of State for International Development, to respond to Aung San Suu Kyi’s call in her Nobel Peace Prize speech for increased funding for refugees from Burma by doubling funding for the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), which provides food and shelter to the refugees.

Speaking in Oslo, Norway, Aung San Suu Kyi delivered a direct appeal to governments to increase their funding stating: “When I was at the Maela refugee camp in Thailand recently, I met dedicated people who were striving daily to make the lives of the inmates as free from hardship as possible. They spoke of their concern over ‘donor fatigue,’ which could also translate as ‘compassion fatigue.’ ... I appeal to donors the world over to fulfil the needs of these people who are in search, often it must seem to them a vain search, of refuge.”

Around 150,000 refugees from Burma live in camps on the Thailand Burma border. The refugees are facing ration cuts of 25 percent, and cuts in other essentials such clothing, blankets and shelter.



Mae La refugee camp on the Thailand Burma border

The reduction in vital supplies for refugees is due to two main reasons. One reason is that the European Union is reducing funding for TBBC. The other reason is that donors have not sufficiently increased funding to cover rising costs of essentials such as rice, and to compensate for lower exchange rates.

In the last Parliamentary session more than 60 MPs signed an Early Day Motion calling for funding to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium to be significantly increased. Overall, refugees are facing a funding shortfall of around 5-10 million dollars.

Burma signs agreement to stop child soldier recruitment

On 27 June Burma’s military-backed government signed a Joint Action Plan to stop the recruitment of child soldiers and release existing child soldiers from the military. The agreement was signed by senior military officials and UN representatives in the capital Naypyidaw. The agreement also grants access to international monitors to ensure the commitments are carried out.

The use of child soldiers in Burma is already illegal but the Burmese Army has continued to recruit and use children as soldiers. The UN Secretary-General’s report on children and armed conflict to the UN Security Council stated that during 2011, “children continued to be recruited by the Tatmadaw [Burmese Army]. Reports continued to indicate that, in addition to children who were formally recruited into the Tatmadaw, children were also used by the Tatmadaw for forced labour, including as porters. In Kachin State, there were verified reports in late 2011 of children being used by the Tatmadaw alongside adults as porters on the front line.”

Previous initiatives have had limited impact on ending the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Child Soldiers International reports that Burma’s government has responded to international criticism of its use of child soldiers by implementing a range of measures over the years, including a high-level Committee for Prevention of Military Recruitment of Underage Children in 2004, a Working Committee for the Prevention of Recruiting Child Soldiers in 2006 and a UN-led country Task Force for monitoring and reporting violations against children in armed conflict in June 2007.

ILO lifts restrictions on Burma

On 13 June, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) announced that it had lifted or suspended its restrictions on Burma.

The organisation has lifted restrictions on Burma receiving ILO technical cooperation and assistance. It also suspended for one year its request for members to review their relationships with Burma and employ sanctions if necessary to ensure forced labour is not being used.

Burma’s Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) privileges were withdrawn by the EU in

1997 because of its widespread use of forced labour. Burma's government has agreed an action plan with the ILO to eradicate forced labour by the end of 2015. However, there is no question that forced labour continues in many parts of the country, including forced portering for the Army and forced conscription of children into the military. A report is due at the November 2012 meeting of the ILO Governing Body to review progress on the implementation of the action plan on forced labour.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) expressed deep concern that, following the ILO decision, EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht have called for the rapid reinstatement of the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) trade privileges for Burma. The ITUC said "Any move by the EU to start a process to reinstate GSP before that report is due, much less before there are measurable results on the ground, would be very premature."

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& Development in Burma**