



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

MARCH
2012

By-elections 'not free and fair'

At a press conference on 31 March, ahead of the by-elections on 1 April, Aung San Suu Kyi told reporters, "I don't think we can consider it a genuine free and fair election, if we consider what has been happening here over the last few months."

Following complaints last month by the National League for Democracy that their campaign activities were being restricted, the Election Commission had promised there would be no further restrictions. However, in March the NLD and other parties continued to experience unfair practices.

The National League for Democracy and other parties have highlighted numerous cases of unfair practices, including problems with voter lists, banning of election rallies, censorship, voter intimidation and bribery.

Censorship and security laws remain in place, making it impossible for parties and candidates to operate freely. On 10 March, Aung San Suu Kyi said that authorities censored a passage of the NLD's campaign message which was broadcast on state TV.

The Unlawful Associations Act also remains in place, which bans many political organisations from being legal parties, including many of the most widely supported ethnic political parties.

On 23 March, the Election Commission cancelled voting in all three Kachin State constituencies, leaving 200,000 Kachin voters unable to vote in the by-election. The Commission claimed that security conditions in those areas were "not conducive to conducting a free and fair by-election." However, The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) denied that security was a legitimate reason to postpone voting. Speaking to the Irrawaddy, KIO spokesperson La Nan said that there was no fighting in the election areas and that the KIO would not interrupt the election.

The government announced in March that it would invite international observers to monitor the election. The Election Commission announced that a total of 159 international observers would monitor the by-elections, including observers from ASEAN, the EU, Japan, India, Australia, USA and Canada.

However, on 21 March, three representatives of the Bangkok-based regional election watchdog Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), who had proved training to local reporters and activists on election monitoring, were deported.

The decision to allow election monitors at such a late stage means that it is more of a diplomatic gesture as it is impossible for the election observers to carry out a proper assessment of whether the by-elections have been free and fair. On 28 March, the US State Department said that the by-election monitoring would not "conform to international standards for conducting an election observation mission."



Aung San Suu Kyi speaking at the NLD press conference on 31 March.

To subscribe to Last Month in Burma, simply send a blank email to:
burmabriefing-subscribe@lists.burmacampaign.org.uk

‘Untold Miseries’ – Human Rights Watch reports on abuses in Kachin State

A new report from Human Rights Watch, “‘Untold Miseries’: Wartime Abuses and Forced Displacement in Burma’s Kachin State,” reveals atrocities committed by the Burmese army.

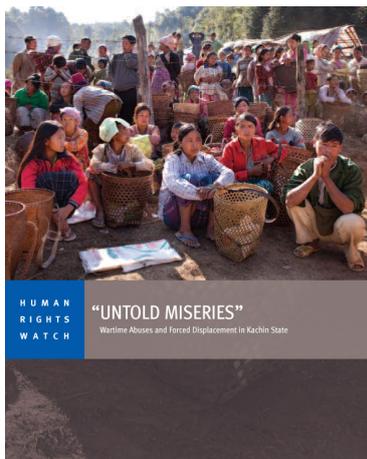
The report describes how the Burmese army has destroyed Kachin villages, forcibly displaced tens of thousands of people, and blocked humanitarian aid to tens of thousands of displaced civilians since June 2011. Around 75,000 ethnic Kachin displaced persons and refugees are in desperate need of food, medicine, and shelter. Only two small convoys of UN aid have been allowed into Kachin state, the latest in March delivered food and other supplies for around 2,200 people for one month.

Soldiers have threatened and tortured civilians during interrogations and raped women. The army has also used antipersonnel mines and conscripted forced labourers, including children as young as 14, on the front lines.

Human Rights Watch talked to displaced Kachin civilians who described being forced to work on the front lines for the Burmese army, enduring torture, and being fired upon by soldiers. Burmese troops have deliberately and indiscriminately attacked Kachin civilians with small arms and mortars.

One man, forced to porter for the army for 19 days, said he witnessed the repeated rape of two Kachin women: “Soldiers would come and take the women and bring them from tent to tent. We were so afraid and we couldn’t watch the whole night. The next morning, the women couldn’t walk right. They seemed like they were in pain. They walked hunched over. And they were crying.”

“There’s still a long way to go before the people of Burma, particularly those in conflict areas, benefit from recent promises of reform,” Elaine Pearson deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch said. “The international community should not become complacent about the serious human rights violations still plaguing Burma.”



Work on Myitsone Dam continues

There have been reports that work at the Myitsone Dam is continuing. In September last year, President Thein Sein issued a statement suspending work on the dam project “during the term of our government.” His decision to suspend the dam project has been seen as symbol of his commitment to reform.

However, the Kachin Development Networking Group (KDNG) reports that work on the project is continuing, with an electric transformer being built and some Chinese workers still at the dam site.

It also reports that villagers forced to relocate for the project have not been allowed to go back to their old villages.

The authorities moved people from five villages in the Myitsone dam flood zone to relocation camps in 2010. Three of those five villages have now been completely bulldozed and destroyed and in another village all public buildings, including schools and orange orchards, have been destroyed. Hundreds of villagers living near the dam have also been ordered to leave the area within 10 days. According to KDNG, five Burmese Army trucks and government vehicles entered the village of Tanghpri on March 17 to enforce the eviction order.

China has called on Burma to restart the dam project. “Myanmar is our friendly neighbor we hope to restart the project as quickly as possible,” said Lu Qizhou, President of China Power Investment Corporation (CPI).

Burma’s dictatorship signed an agreement with CPI in May 2007 for seven large dams along the Irrawaddy. The Myitsone dam is the largest of the seven dams. The Myitsone dam is the largest of the seven dams. It is estimated to cost \$3.6 billion and 90% of the electricity generated by the project would be exported to China.

“The president has not mentioned the other six dams planned for the May Hka and Mali Hka [rivers] which will have the same impacts to the Irrawaddy River and downstream people as the Myitsone dam,” said the KDNG. “Massive gold mining and logging is going on upstream of Myitsone. These destructive activities are also threatening the future of the Irrawaddy River.”

Mahn Nyein Maung released

Mahn Nyein Maung, a member of the Karen National Union (KNU) central committee, was released from Insein Prison in Rangoon on 19 March.

He had been sentenced to life in prison, plus an additional 3 years, for unlawful association and treason on 13th March. He was released after a pardon by President Thein Sein.

In a statement, the KNU said “this act of the government strengthens the building of frank and durable relationship in the time of dialogue for peace with the KNU. Since the release of political prisoners is an important part in the process of building peace and reform, the KNU would like to urge U Thein Sein government to pardon and release unconditionally all the political prisoners, including those of the ethnic nationalities, remaining in the prisons of Burma (Myanmar).”

New Labour Law comes into effect

The new Labour Law, which was passed by parliament in October 2011, finally came into effect this month. The law grants workers in Burma the right to form unions and to strike. However, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has expressed concern that the government may prevent the formation of trade unions which it cannot control.

Despite the legislation, no new trade unions have yet been allowed to register and legislation governing collective bargaining and dispute settlement remains absent. Laws limiting freedom of association remain in place, and the Federation of Trade Unions – Burma (FTUB), remains banned as an alleged “terrorist organisation.”

On 16 March, the government and International Labour Organisation (ILO) signed an agreement aimed at ending forced labor in Burma by 2015. Labour activists have criticised the time-scale of the agreement, saying that it means that forced labour could continue for three more years in the country.

In 2011, the ILO Committee of Experts reported that it had received “extensive and detailed documentation referring to the persistence of widespread forced labour practices by civil and military authorities in almost all of the country’s states and divisions.”

Paper threatened with legal action for reporting corruption

According to the state-run Kyemon newspaper, the Ministry of Mines is considering suing a weekly newspaper, The Voice, for a report alleging corruption at several Burmese government ministries. Kyaw Min Swe, the chief editor of The Voice, told Mizzima that the article was based on an official report by the Union auditor-general to the Public Accounts Committee.

“The international media have wrongly reported that Myanmar is enjoying media freedom, but the censorship board continues to delete many stories and local journals are being sued one after another,” Dr. Than Htut Aung, CEO of the prominent Weekly Eleven Media group, told The Associated Press.

Government to float the kyat

On 28 March, Burma’s Central Bank announced that it would begin a managed flotation of the kyat on 1 April. Under the new system, the exchange rate is determined by the market, but the Central Bank may intervene to prevent large currency fluctuations. The new rate has been set at 818 kyat to the US dollar, closer to the black market rate. The official exchange rate had been fixed at one US dollar to 6.41 kyat.

**Published by Burma Campaign UK, 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT
www.burmacampaign.org.uk tel: 020 7324 4710 fax: +44 20 7324 4717**



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