



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

OCT
2009

Aung San Suu Kyi reaches 14 years in detention

On 24th October Aung San Suu Kyi reached a total of 14 years in detention, most of it under house arrest. On 11th August 2009, after a sham trial, Aung San Suu Kyi was given a further 18 months under house arrest. Her current period of detention is not due to expire until February 2011. On 2 October, the Rangoon Divisional Court rejected Aung San Suu Kyi's appeal against her conviction and Aung San Suu Kyi's two companions also lost their appeals.

On 3 and 7 October, Aung San Suu Kyi met SPDC Liaison Minister Major General Aung Kyi. They have met on five previous occasions between October 2007 and January 2008. The recent meetings follow a letter that Aung San Suu Kyi sent in September to SPDC Chairman Senior General Than Shwe stating that she is willing to cooperate with the junta in on the issue of sanctions proposed a meeting with Western diplomats to discuss the issues.

On 9 October Aung San Suu Kyi met the UK Ambassador and the deputy heads of the Australian and US missions in Burma to discuss the nature and the impact of Western sanctions on Burma. After the meeting, Andrew Heyn, the British Ambassador in Burma, said, "the dialogue is undoubtedly welcome, but my feeling is that it is too early to pass judgment on the wider implications. The Burmese authorities have said the meeting was "a gesture of goodwill". But there have been so many false dawns here before, caution among Burma watchers is understandable."

While Aung San Suu Kyi has managed to use sanctions as leverage to persuade the Generals to resume dialogue, so far all it has only been low level officials talking about talks. Meanwhile, the dictatorship has increased arrests and harassment of democracy activists, and is escalating attacks against ethnic civilians.



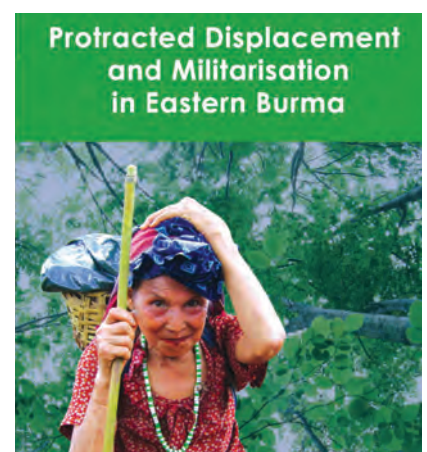
Crimes against Humanity in Eastern Burma

A new report entitled 'Protracted Displacement and Militarisation in Eastern Burma', says at least 75,000 people became refugees and more than half a million were internally displaced in Eastern Burma in the past year, following increased militarization by the Burmese regime. The report, which was released by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), an alliance of 12 aid organisations, states that the situation indicates crimes against humanity are taking place comparable to the situation in Darfur.

TBBC said that the regime's continued militarisation in areas of ethnic minorities is likely to increase in the run up to the regime's elections in 2010 as the regime pressurises ethnic armed groups to transform into Border Guard Forces (BGF).

Since 1996, TBBC said over 3,500 villages, including 120 communities between August 2008 and July 2009, in Eastern Burma have been destroyed and forcibly relocated.

To read the report,
visit:
www.tbtc.org



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lastmonth-subscribe@lists.burmacampaign.org.uk

25 percent of Shan families forcibly relocated

More than a quarter of families in Shan State, north east Burma, were forcibly relocated in the past year, while nine percent of families had at least one member injured by a landmine. A further 24 percent of families had one member taken by Burmese troops for forced labour, according to Professor Chris Beyrer, from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Attacks by Burmese troops in Shan State, Burma's largest state with a population of nearly five million, has been particularly intense, with 39 villages targeted and 10,000 villagers forcibly displaced as "part of a systematic and widespread scorched earth campaign".

Burma's state expenditure on healthcare is amongst the lowest in the world. Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) estimates that just \$US0.70 per capita per year, or 0.3 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP), is spent on the health sector.

Beyrer said that the attacks on ethnic groups were part of the government's preparation for the 2010 elections. "The junta is creating new humanitarian emergencies with its current campaign for political control of ethnic areas and destabilizing its border regions with China," he said. "Burmese refugees continue to flee not only into China, but to Thailand, India, Bangladesh and Malaysia, making this a truly regional concern."

Timor-Leste backs global arms embargo

Momentum for a global arms embargo against Burma is growing as Timor-Leste became the 32nd country, and the first Asian country, to back an arms embargo. Dr Jose Ramos-Horta, President of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, released a statement in October calling on the United Nations to impose a global arms embargo on Burma.

Switzerland also announced its support for a global arms embargo against Burma. The statement from Switzerland came after supporters of the Burma Campaign UK launched an email campaign calling on the Swiss government to support the embargo. Campaigners are attempting to build a global consensus on a UN arms embargo against Burma, in order to help overcome expected opposition at the Security Council by Russia and China.

Burma's 2010 Elections will bring more problems to region, says human rights group

The Burmese junta's proposed 2010 elections, the first step in activating the 2008 constitution, will

have disastrous impacts on Burma and the region, according to a new report by regional human rights network Altsean-Burma.

'2010 Elections: A Recipe for Continued Conflict' states that the regime's preparations for 2010 have already had serious human security impacts on the region - increased crimes against humanity and escalated armed conflict caused 43,800 refugees to cross over into China and Thailand within the past three months alone.

The report reveals serious concerns over the possible conduct of the 2010 elections that is likely to disenfranchise an estimated 1.9 million voters. It also outlines the serious flaws in the 2008 constitution that will intensify the root causes of conflict that has plagued Burma.

"In the past few months, Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has systematically dashed every hope for political space through locking up viable opposition candidates, using violence against ethnic nationalities and inflicting its usual strong-arm tactics on the population. While the elections are expected to be a farce, the greatest tragedy for Burma will be the constitution itself," said Altsean-Burma Coordinator Debbie Stothard.

"The constitution grants the military immunity from prosecution and freedom from public accountability. It also cements military control over future constitutional amendments, rendering any electoral process useless, no matter how free or fair it is. Worse still, the constitution legitimizes military subjugation of ethnic nationality communities," she explained.

'2010 Elections: A Recipe for Continued Conflict' is available at <http://www.altsean.org/Reports/2010Electionsbis.php>

National Democratic Front rejects 2010 Elections

Despite the military regime's increasing pressure on Burma's ethnic groups to take part in the 2010 elections, many are resisting the regime's so-called 'Roadmap to Democracy'.

On 5 October, the National Democratic Front (NDF), a major alliance of armed ethnic groups in Burma, issued a statement rejecting the military regime's 2010 elections. They said: "We, the NDF, reaffirm our position expressly rejecting the SPDC 2010 elections which will implement the 2008 Constitution, adopted by force and fraudulent means ... The 2010 elections will neither resolve

the political crisis faced by the entire people nor will it lead to national reconciliation and democracy. The SPDC Road Map is simply a political process that will turn the country into a “Failed State” and perpetuate the evil existence of SPDC military dictatorship.”

Writing in the ‘Irrawaddy’ magazine recently, Zipporah Sein, General Secretary of the Karen National Union, described Burma’s new constitution as “a death sentence for ethnic diversity.”



“No one seems to pay much attention to what this Constitution will mean for ethnic people,” said Zipporah Sein. “The 2008 Constitution is a death sentence for ethnic diversity in Burma. Military appointed commanders will control ethnic areas. There is no level of autonomy. Our cultures and traditions are given no protection. We will be given no rights to practice our customs, or to speak and teach our languages.

The international community seems content to wait and see if elections in 2010 create a little political space. While they focus on the minutiae of politics in Rangoon and Naypyidaw, all around them Burma is descending into an even greater human rights and humanitarian crisis. They must wake up to the urgency of the current situation.”

Thailand urged to stop building dams in Salween war zones

Fifty one civil society organisations from Burma have submitted a petition to the Thai government to demand an immediate halt to dam plans on the Salween River to avoid being drawn into Burma’s escalating civil war.

The groups cited recent increased military operations and human rights abuses by the Burmese regime around the sites of the planned Hat Gyi dam in Karen State and Ta Sang dam in Shan State, and warned that the projects would never provide guaranteed energy security for Thailand. The regime has stepped up attacks against the

Karen National Union to gain control over roads and power transmission routes to the planned 1,360 megawatt Hat Gyi dam and driven over 3,500 new refugees into Thailand since June.

“The Salween dams will only mean more fighting and more refugees fleeing to Thailand,” said Sai Sai, Coordinator of the Salween Watch Coalition.

Thailand currently depends on Burma’s natural gas for 12.2% of its power, and has recently suffered from supply interruptions. The dams would significantly increase Thailand’s dependency on Burma. “Building dams in Burma’s war zones makes no sense if Thailand wants a stable power supply,” said Montree Chantawong of the Thai-based environmental group TERRA.

For more information, see www.salweenwatch.org

Burma – not an isolationist regime

Despite the military junta’s reputation as an isolationist regime, current diplomatic developments prove that this is not the case. Ali Karti, the Sudanese Minister for Foreign Affairs, recently completed a four-day visit to Burma where he met with Deputy Foreign Minister U Maung Myint. During these meetings, the two countries agreed to boost bilateral relations through international cooperation and economic exchange.

Similarly, in August 2009, Burma established diplomatic ties with Zimbabwe. The ties were established at ambassadorial level, which increases the number of Burma’s ambassadorial ties to 98 countries. 28 countries have embassies in Burma and the Burmese regime has embassies in 30 countries, as well as two permanent missions in New York and Geneva.

Burma’s relationship with Sri Lanka also indicates Burma’s non-isolationist tendencies. In June 2009 the Sri Lankan President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, visited Burma to celebrate the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries. Furthermore, this August there were meetings between entrepreneurs from the two countries in an effort to promote bilateral economic and trade cooperation.

Burma drops in Press Freedom Index

Burma has slipped another spot to rank 171 out of 175 in the latest World Press Freedom Index 2009, released by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF). The World Press Freedom Index measures the degree of freedom that journalists and news organisations have, press freedom violations and the level of censorship.

The report describes Burma as “a paradise for censors, one of the very few countries where all publications are subjected to prior censorship. After China and Cuba, it is the world’s largest prison for journalists and bloggers.”

US citizen begins trial in Burma

This month, US citizen Kyaw Zaw Lwin will go on trial in Burma on charges of fraud and forgery. Kyaw Zaw Lwin, also known as Nyi Nyi Aung, was arrested on arrival in Burma on 3 September, accused of allegedly plotting to incite unrest. He is now charged with fraud for allegedly attempting to use false identification to enter the country and could face up to 14 years in jail. Kyaw Zaw Lwin has said he was tortured during his initial interrogation and denies the charges.

Kyaw Zaw Lwin was a student activist during the 1988 uprising and fled to Thailand to escape the military crackdown on protesters. Later he was resettled in US and has since become a US citizen.

There are a total of 2,168 political prisoners in Burma. This is an overall increase of 49 compared to last month’s figure of 2,119. During October, at least 41 activists were arrested, 21 were sentenced and 3 were released. At least 128 political prisoners are in poor health due to the harsh prison conditions, transfers to remote prisons where there are no doctors, and the denial of proper medical care.

ASEAN eases pressure on Burma

This month leaders of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) met in Thailand for the 15th ASEAN Summit. However, despite increased human rights abuses in Burma and the recent conviction of Aung San Suu Kyi, ASEAN leaders avoided putting pressure on the regime to reform, devoting just three lines of their final declaration to the situation in Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi was not even mentioned during the summit.

The summit was also meant to showcase ASEAN’s first ever human rights body, the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). However, activists throughout the region have criticised the Commission as it has little, if any, power to address human rights abuses, no method to sanction member states for human rights abuses and will be run by government appointees.

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**for Human Rights, Democracy
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