

UN Secretary-General backs out of visit to Burma

Despite mounting pressure for action, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced in December that he won't visit Burma unless there is progress.

On 3 December 2008 112 former Presidents and Prime Ministers from more than 50 nations wrote to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urging him to personally travel to Burma to secure the release of the military junta's 2,100 political prisoners. The initiative was led by the Honorable Kjell Magne Bondevik, former Prime Minister of Norway and President of the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights. Other former Presidents and Prime Ministers joining the effort included Corazon Aquino, Vaclav Havel, George H.W. Bush, Jimmy Carter, Vicente Fox, Mary Robinson, Tony Blair, Jacques Delors, Kim Dae-jung, Mikhail Gorbachev, John Howard, Lionel Jospin, Jose Ramos-Horta, Margaret Thatcher, and Lech Walesa.



The call was also backed by an appeal to Ban Ki-moon from over 241 MPs from across Asia, including Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia.

Ban Ki-moon visited Burma following Cyclone Nargis in May and promised to return to Burma to discuss the political situation. His visit had been scheduled for December 2008. However, in early December, it was announced that he would not visit Burma "without reasonable expectations of a meaningful outcome". There are also no plans for UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari to return to Burma "unless there was a real possibility of moving forward there."

Ban Ki-moon's refusal to go to Burma marks a significant change in the UN's approach to Burma. Rather than seeing their job as to actively seek solutions and make change happen, the UN appears to have given up and is just waiting for the regime to change. It is clear that the regime will not voluntarily go to the negotiating table, and experience has shown that political dialogue with the regime has failed. Pro-democracy groups are now calling on the UN to either admit that it has given up on Burma or look at alternative options, including stronger measures such as returning to the Security Council to seek a resolution and an arms embargo.

Prisoners' families sentenced for exchanging letters

The Burmese regime is continuing its persecution of political prisoners by cracking down on relatives. In December, family members were sentenced for exchanging letters with their relatives in prison.

On December 17, Zaw Naing Htwe, brother of political prisoner Kyaw Kyaw Htwe, was given a nine-year prison sentence by a court in Rangoon's Insein Prison for receiving a letter from his brother, according to The Irrawaddy magazine. Three prison guards who helped Kyaw Kyaw Htwe to send the letter were also jailed.

On December 15, Thant Zin Oo, the brother of Thant Zin Myo, a member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) serving a 19-year sentence at Insein Prison, received a six-month sentence for reading a letter to his brother during a visit to the prison earlier this year. In the letter, relatives of Thant Zin Myo appealed to the junta leader to allow the detained NLD member to receive proper medical treatment.

There have also been reports that local authorities are making it more difficult for families to visit prisoners by denying overnight passes. Relatives of prisoners in Myitkyina prison, Kachin State, were refused guest passes to allow them to stay with local friends.

Political Prisoner commits suicide

Maung San, a political prisoner, committed suicide in Pegu Prison in central Burma on 19 December. Maung San, who was about 35 years old and serving a two-year prison term, reportedly committed suicide following the refusal of prison authorities to provide proper medical treatment outside the prison.

Seven year-old Karen girl raped and killed by Burma Army soldier

The body of a seven year-old girl was found near her home in a village in northern Karen State, Burma, on 27 December. According to the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), she had been raped and shot dead. Villagers in Ma Oo Bin, Kyauk Kyi Township, Nyaunglebin District are reported to have seen a soldier from SPDC Light Infantry (LI) 350 enter the village shortly beforehand, and then heard sounds of a girl crying out for help, followed by rifle shots. The girl's parents and village leaders reported the case the following day to Captain Thet Khaing, the local Commanding officer. However, despite eye witness accounts, no action has been taken.

The KWO has called for the immediate arrest and prosecution of the perpetrator, and for action to be taken against the Commanding Officer for failing to act.

Cyclone volunteer denied medical care

A Burmese cyclone relief worker, Yin Yin Wine, who is detained in Insein Prison in Rangoon, is suffering a stomach or intestinal illness. According to reports in The Irrawaddy, the 36-year-old woman has only been eating boiled rice for two months. She has not received proper medical treatment in prison and has been denied treatment from outside the prison. Yin Yin Wine was arrested in June while distributing relief supplies to cyclone survivors in the Irrawaddy delta.



Zargana. (DVB)

About 21 cyclone relief workers were sentenced to prison terms in November. Zargana, a well-known Burmese comedian imprisoned

after organising relief supplies to survivors of Cyclone Nargis, has been moved to a remote prison in Kachin State, Northern Burma, according to his relatives.

9 NLD Youth members arrested for Independence Day ceremony

The regime arrested nine youth members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) following a ceremony commemorating the 61st anniversary of Burmese Independence Day.

After holding the ceremony the youth members marched from NLD headquarters to Sanchaung Townswup in Rangoon, holding photographs of NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi. They peacefully called for the release of all political prisoners and national reconciliation.

Upon arriving in Sanchaung township they were arrested by the Swan Arr Shin (People's Power Force) a regime backed paramilitary group. The nine are: Tun Tun Win, Htet Htet Oo Way, Ye Ni Oo, Pyae Pyae, Aung Phyo Wai, Min Thein, Win Myint Maung (aka) Pe Pyoat, Kaung Htet Naing, and Thet Maung Tun.

Factory workers jailed after ILO report

A court in Rangoon has sentenced three people to between 5 and 19 years after they filed a report to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) after a soap factory in Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone cut off its workers' salaries. Khin Maung Cho (also known as Pho Toke), a worker at the soap factory, National League for Democracy member Nyo Win and Kan Myint were arrested on 2 August 2007 after they filed the report.

Land seized from farmers for steel factory

Over 1200 acres of land have been taken from farmers in villages between Myin Chan and Taung Tha townships in Mandalay to be used in the development of a military-owned steel factory, according to the Democratic Voice of Burma. A local farmer said Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings had started seizing the land a few years ago. The farmers were told they would receive compensation for the loss of their land, but they have so far received nothing.

Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings is part-owned by the Burmese Ministry of Defence, while the rest of the company is owned mainly by senior military officials and their families. It is among the companies included in US and EU sanctions.

Ethnic Chin group rejects junta's 2010 election plans

The ethnic group Chin National Front have announced that they will not accept the junta's planned general election scheduled for 2010. The CNF rejected the junta's political roadmap

and called for tripartite dialogue between the various ethnic representatives, democracy groups and the junta to establish a genuine federal union.

Thailand, Britain, Singapore push foreign investment to US\$15 billion

Foreign investment in Burma soared to US\$15 billion in 2007-08, according to reports from the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The leading investor was Thailand, investing over US\$7 billion, with Britain and Singapore both investing US\$1 billion each.

The electricity sector benefited most from the investments, receiving over US\$6 billion, whilst the second most invested sector was the oil and gas, receiving US\$3 billion. The foreign investment statistics dwarf internal investments by Burmese companies, which totalled only the equivalent of US\$ 113.7 million in the same period.

Biggest Burma Dirty List Ever Published – 170 Companies shamed

30 new companies were added in December to the “Dirty List” of companies that directly or indirectly fund the Burmese regime. The list, published by the Burma Campaign UK, now totals 170 companies.

Major companies named and shamed on the list include: Toyota, Qantas, TOTAL Oil, Orient Express, Kuoni, TUI, Schlumberger, BBC Worldwide, Lonely Planet Daewoo, China National Offshore Oil Corp and Hutchison Whampoa, owner of 3 Mobile.

In the past year many companies have pulled out of Burma including Cotton Traders, XL, Trailblazer Guides, Jet Gold Corp, CHC and Aquatic. Since the Dirty List was first published six years ago over 100 companies have withdrawn from Burma including PwC, Rolls Royce, DHL, Swiss Re and Willis.

Declining global energy prices force regime to “pump up” domestic petrol prices

Falling global energy prices forced the Burmese regime to increase official petrol prices on December 1st to 2,500 kyat per gallon, from a previous high of 1,900 kyat a gallon in November. No official reason was given by the regime for this price rise but it is commonly viewed as an attempt to increase regime income as falling global oil and gas prices have a knock on effect on the regime’s profits from export revenues from these sectors. Gas exports are estimated as delivering 40% of Burma’s exports by value. Sean Turnell, Economics Professor at Australia’s Macquarie University, commented that “right now the regime seems to be running short of cash.”

The regime has been steadily increasing petrol prices, in September 2008 a gallon cost only 1500 kyat. The increase in price brings the official price close to the black market price, which has been declining in line with global market prices, from a high of 5000 kyat per gallon in September – November 2008. The current black market price is between 2,500 and 2,700 kyat per gallon.

Nobel laureates make new appeal for Aung San Suu Kyi

A group of Nobel Peace Laureates urged Europe and the United Nations to “do their utmost to achieve the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners” and to “force the Burma regime to start a peaceful reconciliation process in order to restore democracy and respect for fundamental human rights .”

U2 singer, Bono stated “We should acknowledge the Nobel laureate who should be here, but is not here. That is Aung San Suu Kyi...We have to tell her and send out a message of love. She is still not able to move freely, and we look forward to the day when she will be.”

The Nobel peace prize winners made the statement following a three-day annual summit, this year held in Paris.

Burma ranked third worst country in world for imprisoning journalists.

Burma has been ranked the third worst country globally for detaining journalists. The country currently imprisons at least 14 journalists, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The CPJ’s annual global census highlighted the importance of online journalists in Burma, which played a crucial role not only in reporting on the brutal crackdown of the peaceful uprising in September 2007 but also reporting the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

The Burmese junta has arrested five journalists and bloggers including comedian Zarganar for reporting the September protests and the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. Zarganar has been sentenced to 59 years in prison.

New Kuwait embassy planned

In December the regime announced plans to open an embassy in Kuwait, following a visit by a delegation from the Burmese Foreign Ministry to Kuwait. Burma established diplomatic ties with Kuwait in 1998 and in August 2008 the two countries signed an agreement on economic and technical cooperation. Despite being described as isolationist by some observers, the regime in Burma is making considerable efforts to strengthen its diplomatic and economic ties. It is clear this regime is anything but isolationist.

Russia sells missiles to Burma

According to reports in the Vedomosti newspaper, Russia has begun to fulfil a 250-million-dollar contract to deliver surface-to-air missiles, the S-125 Pechora-2M, to seven countries, including Burma. The report cited a source in the state-owned Russian Technologies corporation, but it is not known which companies are involved in the contract.

Korea rejects complaint against Daewoo

The Government of Korea has rejected a complaint alleging Daewoo International and the Korea Gas Corporation (KOGAS) are in breach of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises related to their involvement in a large-scale natural gas development project in Burma. The complaint was filed by EarthRights International on behalf of the Shwe Gas Movement and nine Korea-based organizations.

The complaint alleged that Daewoo and KOGAS failed to take the steps necessary to prevent negative human rights and environmental impacts of the Shwe Gas Project and called on the companies and the Korean government to postpone the Shwe Project until breaches of the Guidelines are investigated and addressed. Daewoo International is the operator of the Shwe Project, with a 51% stake, while KOGAS holds an 8.5% stake in partnership with two Indian state-controlled firms and the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE).

Regime urges increased rice exports

Despite countrywide shortages and malnutrition, the regime has increased exports of rice. On 1 December, Prime Minister General Thein Sein urged the agricultural sector to increase rice exports to 3 million tons. In the 2007/2008 fiscal year, about 20,000 tons of rice were exported. Up to October in 2008/2009, over 170,000 tons of rice were exported.

EU gives extra €40 million aid to Burma

The European Commission has given an extra 40.5 million euros (58.7 million dollars) in aid to Burma. A total of 22 million euros is allocated to help cyclone-hit communities in and around the Irrawaddy delta. A further 18.5 million euros is allocated for a programme targeting "other highly vulnerable populations inside Myanmar, as well Burmese refugees in Thailand".

Bangladesh's new PM calls for release of Suu Kyi

At the first press conference after her victory in Bangladesh's parliamentary elections, Sheikh Hasina called for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi. She also said "Burma is a close neighbouring country of Bangladesh and as such we want good neighbourly relations."

Laura Bush speaks out on Burma on Human Rights Day

US First Lady Bush took the opportunity of a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations on 10 December to talk about the situation in Burma:

"Today especially my thoughts turn to the women of Burma. For decades, Burma's military regime has crushed peaceful dissent and carried out violent campaigns against ethnic populations. Children are conscripted as soldiers, and families are forced to perform life-threatening labor. Human trafficking is pervasive, and rape is used as a "weapon of war." The women of Burma have responded to this brutality with inspiring courage. On the border between Burma and Thailand, Dr. Cynthia Maung operates the Mae Tao clinic. Hundreds of patients pass through her doors every day. Most of these men and women are migrant workers or refugees from Burma. Many others make the dangerous crossing-border journey to Thailand because they have no access to health care in Burma...The ruling junta has labeled Dr. Cynthia an insurgent and an opium-smuggling terrorist. But she continues her work to give the people of Burma the care their government denies them. A single voice can be a great weapon against a regime that denies basic human rights.

In April, I presented the Vital Voices Human Rights Global Leadership Award to Charm Tong. At the age of 17, Charm Tong stood before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to describe the military campaign being carried out against the women in Burma's Shan state. She spoke unflinchingly of rape and abuse, though her audience included representatives of the regime she condemned. Charm Tong continues to speak out about the regime's abuses, and she ministers to the needs of those who have fled Burma.

Another Burmese woman, Su Su Nway, defied junta representatives who tried to force her and her fellow villagers to repair a road. She brought the local officials to court under a law prohibiting forced labor - and she won. But the government filed a complaint against Su Su Nway for "insulting and disrupting a government official on duty." This labor activist was sentenced to 18 months in jail. She was released in June 2006 and then returned immediately to advocate for human rights. Then she was arrested in November, just this last November -- or actually, November 2007 after posting fliers near a U.N. official's hotel. She has since been sentenced to 12 years.

These female dissidents follow in the footsteps of Aung San Suu Kyi, the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize winner. Her

example of strength has earned support from around the world, including from here in the United States.

Ruling General Than Shwe has promised a democratic transition for his country. But the junta has engaged in an effort to silence its opponents before the next planned elections in 2010. Since the Saffron Revolution of 2007, the number of political prisoners in Burma has increased from around 1,100 to more than 2,100 now. Female activist Nilar Thein was forced to leave her newborn child and flee into hiding. After a year on the run, she was captured and jailed this September. Her husband is also imprisoned.

The people of Burma have shown their resilience and their commitment to a peaceful, democratic nation. By holding Burma's ruling generals accountable for their abuses, the international community must now show our commitment to the principles we honor today on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

You can read the full speech here: http://www.cfr.org/publication/17974/conversation_with_mrs_laura_bush.html

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



**CAMPAIGNING
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
AND DEMOCRACY IN BURMA**