

Burma back at the Security Council

On 22 June, the UN Security Council appealed for the increased protection of civilian populations threatened by continued violence, including those populations in Burma. US Deputy Ambassador, Jackie Sanders, told the Council that:

“In Burma, there are widespread reports of serious human rights abuses, including rape, by Burmese military personnel in conflict areas and other ethnic minority areas. The Burmese Army’s strategy of forced relocation to deny support to armed insurgents reportedly has been accompanied by serious human rights abuses, including rape. Burmese refugees newly arrived in Thailand and internally displaced Burmese near the Thai-Burma border report that government soldiers in Shan, Karen, and Karenni states continue to rape women and girls there. Killings, beatings, torture, and rape by government soldiers have also been reported against Chin, Rohingya, Mon, and other ethnic minorities. The youngest rape victim was only eight years old.”

UK representative, Karen Pierce, also singled out the poor record of the Burmese government in protecting its civilian population.

Birthday celebrations and protests

On 19 June, Aung San Suu Kyi spent her 62nd birthday under house arrest but the occasion was marked by both demonstrations and birthday celebrations around the world.



In the UK, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Democracy in Burma organised a reception in the House of Commons for Aung San Suu Kyi. The packed reception was attended by many MPs, including Ian McCartney MP, Foreign Office Minister responsible for Burma, Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague MP, and Liberal Democrat Shadow Foreign Secretary Michael Moore. The evening reception followed a day of demonstrations in London. Theatres across the world united for Burma with readings and performances of the new play about Aung San Suu Kyi, ‘The Lady of Burma’. An amazing 32 performances took place in 16 countries.

Red Cross denounces systematic violations

In an unprecedented move, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has made a scathing public denunciation of violations committed by Burma’s regime. The ICRC is usually extremely cautious about criticising regimes and prefers to work quietly behind the scenes. So their public criticism is a damning indictment of the extent of the regime’s abuses and a measure of the organisation’s frustration at the increasing restrictions imposed on humanitarian organisations working in the country.

The ICRC described how the military routinely abuses the civilian population, subjecting men, women and children to “*numerous acts of violence... including murder*” and to arbitrary arrest and detention. In what it described as an “*institutionalized and widespread practice*”, thousands of detainees are forced to work as porters for the military, where they subjected to degrading treatment, or even murder, exposed to armed conflict and suffer from exhaustion and malnutrition.

“The actions of the authorities have also resulted in immense suffering for thousands of people in conflict-affected areas... The repeated abuses committed against men, women and children living along the Thai-Myanmar border violate many provisions of international humanitarian law,” said Mr Kellenberger, ICRC President. The organisation also stated that “*increasingly severe restrictions imposed on the ICRC by the government have made it impossible for the organization’s staff to move about independently in the affected areas and have hampered the delivery of aid.*”

Burma favours China in gas deal

In a snub to India and South Korea, the regime has decided to sell gas from the Shwe field to China, despite the fact that China was not the highest bidder. Indian petroleum companies, GAIL and ONGC Videsh, are reassessing their involvement in their Burma operations following the decision to sell gas to China. GAIL is now questioning its future investments in Burma, as well as its participation in the pipeline of natural gas in the Shwe gas field. South Korean company Daewoo Corporation, one of the largest stakeholders in the project, could face heavy losses if the deal with China goes ahead. Daewoo is considering legal proceedings against Burma's military regime.

Forced labour still widespread

An ILO Committee report presented to the International Labor Conference in June concluded that forced labor is still widely used in Burma. The report said:

"The Committee expressed its profound concern at the forced labour situation in Myanmar, as reflected in the observation of the Committee of Experts. It concluded that none of the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry had yet been implemented, and the imposition of forced labour continued to be widespread, particularly by the army."

UN envoy to set up child soldier monitoring system

Radhika Coomaraswamy, UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, visited Burma in June to set up a program to monitor the use of child soldiers. Burma has an estimated 70,000 child soldiers, more than any other country.

US & Burma hold rare talks in China

The United States held rare talks with Burma's military junta in Beijing in June to press for the release of the Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners in Burma. It was the highest level direct talks between the two countries in recent years, with the US officials led by deputy US assistant secretary of state Eric John and Burma's Foreign Minister Nyan Win and Information Minister Kyaw Hsan.

President Bush on Burma

In a speech to current and former dissidents from around the world in Prague, President Bush said: *"There are many other dissidents who could not join us because they are being unjustly imprisoned or held under house arrest. I look forward to the day when conferences like this one include Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma."*

New report questions drug policies in Burma

On 26 June, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) released its annual drug report, which stated that Burma remained the world's second-largest opium producer and the largest producer of methamphetamines in Southeast Asia. The UNODC report claimed that Burma's poppy cultivation fell 34% last year to 21,500 hectares. Despite the reduction in area under cultivation, increased yields kept opium production in 2006 nearly the same as 2005.

However, a recent report issued by the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN) is highly critical of some of the conclusions drawn by the UNODC. The SHAN report stated that a random survey in late 2006 showed that several areas designated as "poppy-free" by the UNODC in their October 2006 report were actually still growing poppies under the direct patronage of the SPDC Army.

Ethnic Delegation Meets US First Lady

A delegation from the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) met Laura Bush in the White House on 12 June. Lian H Sakhong, General Secretary of the ENC, said he asked the US government to promote the issues of democratic reform and federalism in Burma within the international community.

The ENC delegation also met with seven congressmen, including Rep Joseph Pitts, and five senators, including senators Richard Lugar and Edward M Kennedy. The Ethnic Nationalities Council was established in 2001 by exile ethnic groups, including Chin, Kachin, Karen, Mon, Arakan and Karenni.

Burma one of worst countries for human trafficking

The US State Department's latest annual report on human trafficking around the world ranks Burma as one of the worst countries. In a press statement, Ambassador Mark Lagon, Director, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, dedicated the report to Ko Maung, a Burmese victim of trafficking.

Christian publisher threatened with jail

A Christian publisher has been threatened with 12 years' imprisonment unless he stops publishing books on theology, according to Release International.

The group also reports that the military government has begun to compile a comprehensive list of Christians, including details of children's homes, assemblies, pastors, leaders, church members and even Christian families.

More AIDS activists arrested

On 5 June a further 11 HIV/AIDS activists were arrested after campaigning for the release of prominent HIV/AIDS activist Phyu Phyu Thin. They were arrested after being lured to the Weibagi hospital in Rangoon with promises of free treatment. The patients had held demonstrations in Rangoon pagodas wearing white shirts and red ribbons while praying for the release of Phyu Phyu Thin, who was arrested on May 21. The 11 activists were released on 9 June. However, there are growing concerns for the safety of Phyu Phyu Thin, following reports that she is on hunger strike. US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack also called for Phyu Phyu Thin's release and said Burma should unconditionally release her from jail and give her medical attention.

Su Su Nway released

Su Su Nway, who was arrested on May 15, was freed on 7 June.

Su Su Nway was imprisoned last year for her fight against forced labour practices. She still remains under the care of Muslim Charity Hospital in Rangoon but police guards have been removed from the hospital and her family and some friends have been able to visit her. The regime also released other 51 activists who were arrested last month for joining a prayer vigil for Aung San Suu Kyi.



Ivanhoe still struggling to sell Burmese assets

Canadian mining company Ivanhoe has still not been able to find a buyer for its 50 percent stake in the Monywa copper mine in Burma.

Earlier this year, in desperation to rid itself of the controversial investment, Ivanhoe was forced to place the holding in an independent trust, leaving it with nothing but a promissory note for proceeds of any future sale. The fact that Ivanhoe has struggled for so many months to find a buyer for the profitable mine undermines arguments by opponents of sanctions that there is no point in western companies pulling out as Asian companies are keen to invest in Burma and will snap up assets.

Detained Shan leader rejects Convention

According to the Irrawaddy magazine, members of Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) have confirmed that Hkun Htoon Oo, their leader who is being detained in Kachin State's Putao prison, is firmly opposed to the ceasefire group's further attendance of the junta-organized National Convention. The SNLD was the second largest winning party in the 1990 elections.

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