



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

MARCH
2009

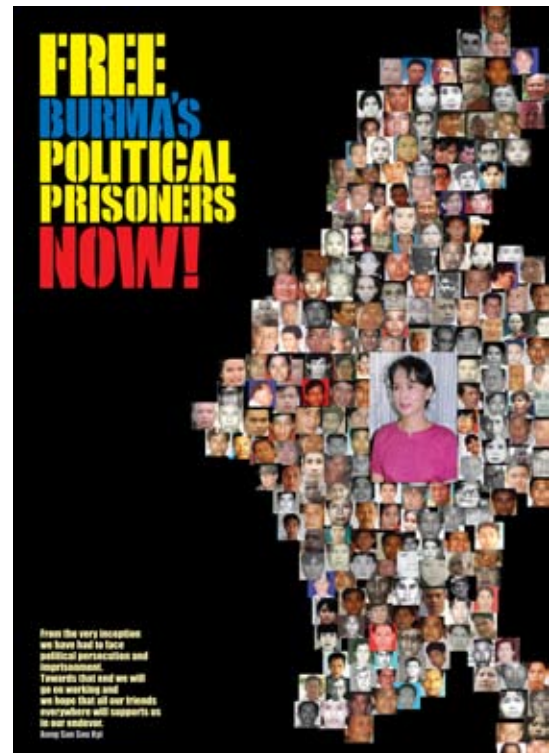
UN declares Aung San Suu Kyi's detention illegal

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued a judgment in March declaring that the ongoing detention of Burma's democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is illegal and in violation of both Burmese and international law. It also called for her immediate release.

The Working Group, an independent and impartial body of the UN Human Rights Council, has previously issued four opinions that her prior terms of house arrest violated international law, but this is the first time the Working Group has also declared her detention to be a violation of domestic Burmese law.

Global campaign to Free Burma's Political Prisoners launched

A global signature campaign for the release of Burma's political prisoners was launched on 13 March, Burma's Human Rights Day. The campaign aims to collect 888,888 signatures before 24 May 2009, the legal date that Aung San Suu Kyi should be released from house arrest.



The campaign is led by exiled Burmese rights groups, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) and Forum for Democracy in Burma (FDB) and backed by over 160 Burma exile and solidarity groups in 24 countries. The petition, calling on UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to make it his personal priority to secure the release of all political prisoners in Burma, is online here: www.burmacampaign.org.uk/fbppn.htm

In March, the regime detained 20 activists, including nine NLD members, and sentenced 32 to prison terms. Following his visit to Burma in February, UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur Thomas Ojea Quintana submitted his report to the UN Human Rights Council. The report confirmed that there are over 2,100 prisoners of conscience and called for their release. Wunna Maung Lwin, Burmese Ambassador to the UN, responded to the report by denying there were any prisoners of conscience in Burma.

451,000 people internally displaced in Eastern Burma

A report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) found that "as of October 2008, there were at least 451,000 people reported to be internally displaced in the rural areas of eastern Myanmar. This is however a conservative figure, and there is no information available on figures for internally displaced people (IDPs) in several parts of the country."

The report, entitled "Myanmar: No end in sight for internal displacement crisis" said that in 2008 alone an estimated 66,000 ethnic people in Eastern Burma were forced to become displaced in order to

avoid the effects of armed conflict and human rights abuses. While IDPs living in Eastern Burma remain the most vulnerable, humanitarian access to this population continues to be very restricted. The report also found that people in many parts of the country continue to be displaced by forced labour and land confiscation "in the context of state-sponsored development initiatives."



Human Rights Council condemns 'systematic' abuses in Burma

On 27 March, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution condemning the regime for the "ongoing systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms" of the Burmese people. The resolution called on the regime to halt "politically motivated arrests" and immediately release all political prisoners. It also called for a genuine, substantive and time-bound process of open dialogue and national reconciliation with all political parties and ethnic groups.

Foreign investment in Burma up by 93%

Statistics released by the regime's Central Statistical Organisation show that foreign investment in Burma reached US\$ 974.9 million in 2008, an increase of 93% on 2007. Over US\$860 million of this investment was in the mining sector with US\$855 million coming from China and the remaining US\$5 million from Singapore. The oil and gas sector did receive some investment in 2007-2008, with US\$ 114 million being invested, of which US\$ 95 million was from Russia and US\$ 20 million from Vietnam.

The regime also stated that since it opened the country to investment in late 1988 US\$15 billion has been invested in the country, in a total of 422 projects. These investments came from 29 countries, with US\$ 7 billion coming from Burma's neighbour Thailand.

UN's post-Nargis mandate extended

The mandate of the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), formed to coordinate relief efforts following Cyclone Nargis, has been extended for another year. The TCG consists of representatives of the Burmese regime, the UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Shortly after agreeing to extend the mandate of the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) in late February, the Burmese regime halted a program to fast-track visa applications for foreign aid workers involved in Nargis-related projects. The move means that foreign employees of international NGOs must now follow the complicated and time-consuming visa application process that was in place before and immediately after Cyclone Nargis struck the Irrawaddy delta last May.

There have been reports that the Irrawaddy delta region is facing a drinking water crisis this summer because lakes and ponds used for drinking water were destroyed by sea water after the cyclone. According to the Irrawaddy magazine, a staff member with a French INGO that distributes drinking water in the region said governmental red

tape is one of the factors that hamper distribution. "For example," he said "before we can distribute water to a village, we need to get permission from the Township Peace and Development Council, a military command unit and other local government agencies. We must submit every step of our activities to them."

Global Fund to return to Burma?

The Global Fund, a leading funder of programs to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, may be considering returning to Burma following a recent visit by four members of the Fund, according to a report by the Chinese news agency Xinhua.

The Global Fund pulled out of Burma in 2005 due to regime restrictions. In a statement at the time of the withdrawal, it said, "Given new restrictions recently imposed by the government of Myanmar, the Global Fund has concluded that its grants to the country cannot be managed in a way that ensures effective program implementation."

China: "Burma is an International Issue"

Addressing the United National Human Rights Council in Geneva, the Chinese representative, Yan Jiarong, stated that "The stability and development of Myanmar (Burma) is not only in the interest of the region, [but it is] also the interest of the whole international community". She continued, "We understand the difficulties and challenges that Myanmar is confronted with in domestic development and in promoting national reconciliation, especially in the current rampant financial crisis."

Commentators have speculated that the statement may be part of a Chinese policy shift towards Burma. Yan expressed China's hope that "the world would foster a conducive environment for gradually achieving democracy and development in the country". The statement is in contrast to China's previous position of referring to Burma's problems as an internal issue.

Major parties will not contest 2010 unless constitution is revised

The Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP) has stated that it will not contest the regime's 2010 election in Burma unless the constitution is revised.

CRPP Chairman Aye Thar Aung said "Since this constitution does not have democratic principles and does not guarantee the right of ethnic people, the constitution must be reviewed and amended. Only after that, we will consider contesting the 2010 general elections."

The CRPP consists of representatives of the political parties that won the vast majority of seats in the 1990 democratic election, including the National League for Democracy, Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), Zomi National Congress (ZNC) and Mon National League for Democracy.

KNU ordered to leave Thailand

The Thai authorities have written to the Karen National Union (KNU) ordering KNU leaders to leave Thailand and return to Burma. This recent move is part of a pattern of ongoing pressure on the KNU by Thai authorities. Many observers believe that Thailand is acting under pressure from the Burmese regime. Thailand has become increasingly dependent on imports of gas from Burma.

Serbia admits arming junta

The Serbian government has admitted that in 2008 the country sold weapons to Burma. The admission came in a government report on the development of Serbia's domestic arms industry, which grew to record levels in 2008. It is not known which weapons were sold to Burma.

Bombs explode in Rangoon

There were reports that two bombs exploded in Rangoon on 3 March. No casualties were reported. According to Mizzima News, the two bombs exploded in the space of an hour in Padomma Park, Sanchaung Townships and at a bus stop in Kamayut Townships. On 26 March a bomb exploded at a guesthouse in Rangoon's North Okkalapa Township killing one person and injuring two.

Lloyd's biggest insurer quits Burma

QBE Insurance has announced it has cancelled insurance it provided to Burma and is to cease providing insurance to companies operating in the country. QBE is the largest managing agent at Lloyd's of London and describes itself as "Australia's largest international general insurance and reinsurance group".

In a statement to the Burma Campaign UK, Frank O'Halloran, QBE's Chief Executive said: "QBE has reviewed its various portfolios around the world and has cancelled the few incidental Burmese exposures on multinational insurance policies which could have a direct or indirect benefit for the current ruling party in Burma... QBE does not provide insurance for any business owned in Burma."

The role of QBE in the Burmese insurance market was highlighted in the Burma Campaign UK report, "Insuring Repression" published in July 2008. The report is available here: www.burmacampaign.org.uk/insurance.php

Gems trade hit by sanctions

Burma's gem trade has reportedly been hit hard by US sanctions which ban the import of Burmese gems, combined with the effects of the global economic crisis. The BBC reported that orders for Burmese precious stones have almost come to a halt and prices have fallen dramatically. It is estimated that 90% of the world's rubies come from Burma and gems are a major source of revenue for the regime. The gems business is dominated by the state-owned Myanmar Economic Holdings and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC).

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