



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

SEPT
2012

Aung San Suu Kyi and Thein Sein visit USA

In September, both Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein visited the USA.

Aung San Suu Kyi made a 17-day tour of the United States. In Washington, she met President Obama and accepted the Congressional Gold Medal. In New York she met UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon at the UN headquarters and received the Atlantic Council's 2012 Global Citizen Award. Her tour also included visits to California and Indiana, where she met members of the Burmese community.

In an interview with Voice of America, Aung San Suu Kyi said that Burma's reforms were not yet irreversible. "Under the present constitution, the army can always take over all parts of government if they think this is necessary. So until the army comes out clearly and consistently in support of the democratic process, we cannot say that it's irreversible. But I don't think we need fear a reversal too much either," she said.

She also said that sanctions had helped the struggle for democracy but supported moves to ease US sanctions. "There have been many claims that sanctions have hurt Burma economically, but I did not agree with that point of view ... But I think the political impact has been very great, and that has helped us in our struggle for democracy," she said.

President Thein Sein also visited New York, where he addressed the UN General Assembly. He said that there had been "irreversible steps in the democratic transition". In a panel discussion at the Asia Society in New York he reiterated the need "to try to meet the democratic standard that has been set internationally." While he claimed his government planned "to achieve sustainable peace", he appeared to blame the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) for the ongoing war in Kachin State, saying "from the government side, we have ordered our troops to stop fighting against Kachin troops. But our Kachin colleagues have not reciprocated in a similar way."



President Barack Obama with Aung San Suu Kyi in the Oval Office, Sept. 19, 2012 (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Political prisoner releases ahead of Thein Sein's US visit

Around 88 political prisoners were released on 17 September, ahead of Thein Sein's visit to the USA, leaving hundreds of political prisoners still in Burma's prisons.

The move prompted accusations that Thein Sein is using political prisoners as bargaining chips. For decades the dictatorship in Burma employed a tactic of releasing some political prisoners ahead of important international summits or at times when there were discussions on increasing sanctions.

"President Thein Sein claims to be a reformer, but 18 months after becoming President there are still hundreds of political prisoners, and he has not abolished any of the laws which were used to arrest and jail them," said Wai Hnin Pwint Thon, Campaigns Officer at Burma Campaign UK. "These releases are not about reform, they are about providing a fig leaf for President Obama for him to justify lifting more sanctions, despite the fact that Burma is still not a democracy and still has one of the worst human rights records in the world."

While Thein Sein has released hundreds of political prisoners, most have only been released

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

conditionally, face travel and education restrictions, and have received no compensation or even an apology.

Many former political prisoners are suffering from severe physical and psychological health problems resulting from years of torture and detention in dismal conditions, often in isolation from other prisoners or in prisons far from their families. However, they are not receiving support.

Shell (not his real name), who spent a total of 14 years in prison for his pro-democracy activities, told Human Rights Watch, "Most of the political prisoners are very poor and they suffer a lot when they are released. They are homeless, unemployed, and face a daily struggle. When I was released on January 13, I didn't know where I lived or what I should do. I had no home, no family, no money, no job."

Human Rights Watch condemned the government's persecution of former political prisoners. Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said "Government repression against former political prisoners raises concerns about the true extent of reforms in Burma."

Thousands flee fighting in Kachin State

Fighting in Kachin State, northern Burma forced an estimated 10,000 people to flee their homes during September. Most of the displaced are from the jade-mining area of Hpakant and are taking shelter in local churches and monasteries. Between mid-August and early September, around 5,000 Kachins who had fled to China were sent back to Kachin State.

The Kachin Women's Association (KWAT) has documented that nearly 60,000 people sheltering in Kachin-controlled areas have received only 4% of their basic food needs from international aid groups, including the UN.

KWAT estimates that over US\$2 million a month is needed to feed the displaced in KIA-controlled areas. They say that reliable mechanisms exist to provide aid cross-border through local community-based groups, but international donors are not working with these groups.

"The world is now pumping massive amounts of aid into Burma, so why are they ignoring the Kachin" said KWAT coordinator Moon Nay Li.

Reports of serious human rights abuses against Kachin civilians continue, including shooting villagers on sight, torture, forced labour and the use of rape, gang-rape and sexual violence by the Burmese Army against ethnic women.

"Alarming increase" in arbitrary arrests

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners-Burma (AAPP) has recorded an "alarming increase" in the number of arbitrary arrests this year, and is concerned that the government is using arbitrary arrest as "a tool to repress critical voices".

In a report released in September, AAPP said that since January 2012 they have documented "at least 200 politically motivated arrests without formal charges in this eight month time period. Of these arrests, less than 60 have resulted in formal court proceedings. Many leave detention unsure whether they will face trial or not. It is clear that politically motivated arrests remains a favored tactic for suppressing critical voices of democracy and human rights."

The most frequent reason for arbitrary arrest is protesting. AAPP said suspected leaders of a demonstration are often threatened and intimidated. The new public demonstration bill is now being used to arrest and convict peaceful protestors. Protestors risk one year imprisonment for demonstrating without a permit, which is difficult to obtain, or six months imprisonment for violating the strict regulations of the protest bill, which include giving speeches that contain false information or chanting slogans that were not pre-approved. In some cases, protestors are not released from detention until they sign a form stating they will never get involved in politics again.

On 24 September, at least 13 activists were arrested for a peaceful march on 21 September, International Day of Peace.

Human rights abuses continue in Arakan State

Human rights abuses have continued in Arakan State, including arbitrary arrest and the systemic use of forced labour against the Rohingya.

According to a new report by The Arakan Project, the use of forced labour has even increased across large areas of North Arakan/Rakhine State since violence broke out in June 2012. Forced labour has been used for portering for the army, road repairs, camp maintenance and forced cultivation in army camps and paddy fields.

"Much of the discussion on the plight of the Rohingya has focused on the 1982 Citizenship Law, which renders the Rohingya stateless, but a pernicious element behind the inter-ethnic strife is the discriminatory imposition of forced labour, solely on the Rohingya," said Chris Lewa, Director of The Arakan Project.

President Thein Sein's call for Rohingya to be put in camps and resettled in third countries seemed to generate support across the country. Hundreds of Buddhist monks held a rally in Mandalay in support of the President's proposal.

Protest continues at copper mine

In September, hundreds of villagers continued their protest against the Letpadaung copper mine in Monywa, north west Burma. The protest has attracted support from across the country, with students and activists from Rangoon and Mandalay joining the protests.

The copper mine is a joint venture between Chinese Wan Bao Mining Company and the military-owned Union of Myanmar Economics Holding Ltd. The protestors are calling for the project to be halted, saying that it has led to environmental damage, forced relocations and land confiscations.

US lifts remaining sanctions

On 26 September, the United States announced that it would begin easing its import ban on goods from Burma. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said "In recognition of the continued progress toward reform and in response to requests from both the government and the opposition the United States is taking the next step in normalizing our commercial relationship."

Earlier in the month the US Congress also fast-tracked legislation authorising financial assistance and loans to Burma through the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), including The World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Asian Development Bank.

**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**