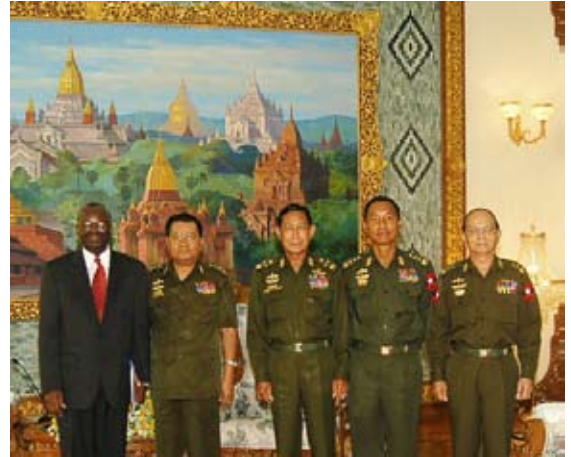


Two more UN Envoy visits fail to secure change

During February, two UN envoys, Special Advisor Ibrahim Gambari and Human Rights Special Rapporteur Thomas Ojea Quintana, visited Burma. As with the previous 37 visits by UN envoys, no concessions or reforms were secured from Burma's generals.

"I do not see any development yet," a spokesman for the National League for Democracy (NLD) told reporters following Gambari's visit. During his 4 day trip, Gambari met Aung San Suu Kyi, and several government ministers and diplomats. However, Burma's dictator Senior General Than Shwe, again refused to meet him.

Following Quintana's six-day visit to the country, he said human rights in Burma had not improved since his first visit seven months earlier. The Special Rapporteur was allowed to visit a few political prisoners but failed to meet with NLD leaders, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, or members of other pro-democracy and ethnic groups. Instead, he held meetings with regime officials, ministers, and pro-junta organizations. On 15-16 February, the SPDC took him to Karen State where he met members of the pro-junta armed groups Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council.



UN Envoy Gambari with Senior General Than Shwe and SPDC leaders in 2007

"Human rights abuses are worse than at any time in the past twenty years. The UN must drop its softly softly approach and take a firmer approach, setting benchmarks and timelines for change," said Mark Farmaner, Director of Burma Campaign UK.

Positive steps could include:

- Setting benchmarks and timelines for change, with the threat of stronger action if they are not met.
- Proper support for the envoys from the United Nations Security Council, in the form of a binding resolution requiring the regime to reform.
- Any new sanctions from individual countries or the European Union could be linked with whether the regime responds positively to the requests made by UN envoys. If the regime knows new sanctions could be imposed if they continue to defy the UN and ignore its envoys, then there is more incentive to engage.

Calls for Burma's leaders to be investigated for human rights abuses over Nargis response

Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) should be referred by the United Nations Security Council for investigation by the International Criminal Court for its human rights abuses in the wake of Cyclone Nargis last year, the first independent report assessing the response to the disaster says.

The report, *After the Storm: Voices from the Delta*, says the SPDC obstructed relief to victims of the cyclone, arrested aid workers and severely

restrained accurate information in the wake of the disaster. The report charges these abuses may constitute crimes against humanity through the creation of conditions whereby the basic survival needs of victims cannot be adequately met, "intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health," violating Article 7(1)(k) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Professor Chris Beyrer, Director of the Center for Public Health and Human Rights at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, says the report findings are evidence of a wide array

of abuses perpetrated by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in the response to a disaster which is in violation of international humanitarian relief norms and legal frameworks for disaster relief. “The people of the Delta told us how the Burmese military regime hindered cyclone relief efforts, confiscated aid supplies and land, and used forced labor, including forced child labor, in its reconstruction efforts. However, the report also illustrates the impressive capacity of ordinary Burmese citizens to assist their neighbors in a timely fashion, even as their Government makes such efforts more difficult,” noted Dr. Beyrer.

The report was jointly released by the Center for Public Health and Human Rights of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Emergency Assistance Team -Burma (EAT), a border-based social organization staffed by community aid workers from cyclone affected areas in Burma.

The report is available to download here:
<http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/reports.php>

ASEAN fails to address Rohingya refugee issue

In the run-up to the ASEAN summit in February, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, as well as ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan, all said the Rohingya issue would be brought up for discussion at the summit. However, at the summit itself, ASEAN leaders failed to adequately address the issue and accepted the regime’s offer to allow some of the Rohingya refugees back into the country. The regime’s offer was made on the condition that the refugees must prove they were ‘Bengalis’ who had settled in Burma. ASEAN’s acceptance of the SPDC’s offer does not address the root causes of why the Rohingya are fleeing Burma and fails to provide adequate protection to Rohingya.

The junta denies the existence of the Rohingya as an ethnic group. They are subjected to systematic, persistent and widespread human rights violations by the ruling military regime, including denial of citizenship rights, severe restrictions of freedom of movement and arbitrary arrests. In February, Burma’s Consul General in Hong Kong, Ye Myint Aung, described the Rohingya as “ugly as ogres,” and insisted that they should not be described as being from Burma, according to the South China Morning Post. He denied that the Rohingya were an ethnic group of Burma because of their “dark brown” skin compared with the “fair and soft” skin of people from Burma.

Responding to international condemnation of reports that Thai authorities forcibly expelled Rohingya refugees and towed them out to sea, Thailand launched an investigation. In an interview with CNN, Thailand’s Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva accepted there had been “some instances” of Rohingya boat people being pushed out to sea. He said “I have reason to believe some instances of this happened, but if I can have the evidence as to who exactly did this I will certainly bring them to account.”

The European Parliament condemned the Burmese regime for their continuous persecution of the Rohingya and called on the regime to restore citizenship rights to the ethnic group. They also urged Thailand not to repatriate the Rohingya refugees.

Prisoner releases do not signify change

More than 6,000 prisoners were released in February. The vast majority were ordinary criminals but there were between twenty and thirty political prisoners included in the amnesty. However, there is no indication that the releases signify any kind of deeper reform by the regime. Burma’s dictators regularly release thousands of prisoners from Burma’s jails. This is partly because of overcrowding, and partly because the releases are meant to bring good Karma to the generals themselves. There are often a small number of political prisoners among those releases. Prisoners who are released are often elderly and ill, and the regime knows it can get propaganda benefits through the releases.

UN Secretary General urges release of all political prisoners

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has called on Burma’s military junta to release all political prisoners. Speaking after a meeting of the ‘Group of Friends on Myanmar’ at the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon said, “There are still hundreds and hundreds of detainees (held) under political reasons. I would urge again the Myanmar authorities to release all the detainees, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.”

Asked about his proposed trip to Burma, he said he was willing to visit Burma, but remained noncommittal. “I will try to visit, but there may be some issues—first of all, I have to discuss with the Myanmar government about timing, about agendas which I would be able to discuss, but nothing has yet been discussed,” he said.

More prison sentences

During February 4 democracy activists were arrested and 5 were sentenced. Dee Nyein Lin, a leading member of the All Burma Federation

of Student Unions (ABFSU), was sentenced to a total of 15 years and six months imprisonment on charges of taking part in anti-government demonstrations and establishing an illegal organization. Other ABFSU leaders Kyaw Ko Ko and Nyan Linn Aung were sentenced to three years in prison. A court in Insein prison sentenced NLD MPs Nyi Pu and Tin Min Htut to 15 years in prison for writing an open letter to the UN.

The regime also extended the house arrest of NLD Deputy Chairman U Tin Oo by another year.

Some political prisoners had their sentences cut but they all still face long prison terms. Comedian Zarganar had his original sentence of 59 years cut by 24 years and he now faces 35 years in prison. Labour activist Su Su Nway's sentence was reduced from 12 years and six months to eight years and six months and blogger and NLD member Nay Phone Latt's 20 year sentence was reduced to 12 years.

NLD starts mass campaign for the release of all political prisoners

The National League for Democracy (NLD) launched a nationwide signature campaign on 12 February calling for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners. The petition campaign was launched at the NLD headquarters in Rangoon during a Union Day celebration attended by nearly 300 party members.

"The campaign is meant to show the ruling military junta and the international community the solidarity of the people and support of the people," NLD spokesman Nyan Win said.

UN reports increased opium poppy cultivation in Burma

A new report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reveals that Burma's opium poppy cultivation increased by 3% in 2008, the second consecutive annual increase. UN officials say that about 94 percent of the region's opium comes from Burma. Burma remains the world's second biggest source of opium.

On 27 February, the US State Department released its annual International Narcotics Control Strategy Report. The report noted the increase in opium poppy cultivation and also said that Burma remains a major player in the manufacture and regional trafficking of methamphetamine tablets.

Rice exports double

Burma's rice exports have nearly doubled, to around 400,000 tonnes since January. One reason for the strong sales has been the cheap price of Burmese

rice on the international market. Burma is selling 25 percent broken rice at US \$270-\$280 per ton, compared with \$348-US\$353 quoted for a similar Vietnamese variety. However, while export prices are low, domestic prices are continuing to rise.

In January the World Food Program reported that more than five million people are below the food poverty line in Burma. In Chin State, near Burma's border with India, at least 30 children were reported to have died as a result of a famine and at least 100,000 ethnic Chin, or 20 percent of the state's population, has been affected by the food emergency.

Confiscated land rented to rightful owners

Farmers in Min Bya Township, Arakan State, have reportedly been forced to rent their own farmland from the Burmese army for cultivation after the army confiscated their land.

"The Burmese army confiscated our land to build an army battalion but nothing was done on the land. Later the army official rented the farm to us to cultivate with paddy rice. We have to pay 8 tinns [20 baskets] of paddy per acre to the army to rent the lands from them," a farmer told Narinjara news.

Angelina Jolie visits Burma refugee camp



Angelina Jolie visited the Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp on the Thailand Burma border in February as part of her work as goodwill ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). There are around 20,000 registered refugees from Burma in the camp, most are ethnic Karenni.

Angelina Jolie spoke to several refugee families in the camp. In a UNHCR statement, she said, "I was saddened to meet a 21-year-old woman who was born in a refugee camp, who has never even been out of the camp and is now raising her own child in a camp." She also asked Thai authorities to give refugees in northern Thailand greater freedom to move around and seek higher education, and ensure they are not forced back to Burma.

Burma opens diplomatic ties with Andorra

The regime in Burma has established diplomatic relations with Andorra, the world's sixth smallest nation, according to the state newspaper The New Light of Myanmar. "The (countries), desirous of establishing friendly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation on the basis of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations decided to establish diplomatic relations between the two countries at Ambassadorial level with effect from 11 February 2009." the paper reported.

Sanctions hitting Burmese gems industry

Recent reports suggest that US sanctions on Burma's gems industry are starting to have an impact. A gem trader in Mogok, one of the centres of Burma's gems industry, told The Irrawaddy that at least 50 mine sites in the area have decreased production and several have closed completely since the US Congress approved a law restricting gem imports from Burma last July.

"Work at many gem sites has slowed down because it is becoming more difficult to export the gems now that they are on the sanctions list," the trader said. He added that many investors are reluctant to spend money to fuel earthmovers and other heavy equipment because they are no longer sure they will be able to sell the gems they find.

Although the Burmese junta has continued to hold gem auctions in Rangoon, sales to international jewellers have reportedly dropped by at least 50 percent and that market prices across the country have also fallen by half. Official statistics show that Burma exported US \$647.53 million worth of gems in the fiscal year 2007-08. However, Burma's gems production decreased from 7.178 million carats in the 2nd quarter of 2007 to 6.491 million carats in the 2nd quarter of 2008, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit.

In Burma, the gems industry is owned by the state, but since the 1990s, the government has allowed private investment through joint-venture enterprises. But licenses are only granted to cronies of the ruling generals, including Tay Za, who runs Htoo Trading Co, and Ne Win Tun, of Ruby Dragon Jade & Gems Co Ltd.

UNA opposes 2010 elections

The United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) have announced that they will not take part in the regime's sham elections scheduled for 2010. "We expressed our stand especially on the proposed general elections in 2010. We expressed clearly that we would not contest this planned general election. The election should be held only after resolving all

issues and deadlocks. Currently, they have not yet released any (political) prisoners and have not held dialogue with anyone else," Pu Cing Tsing Thang, UNA spokesperson told Mizzima News. The UNA is a coalition of 12 ethnic political parties which contested the 1990 general elections.

Activists condemn Clinton for sidelining human rights

Human rights campaigners reacted angrily to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks that human rights issues "can't interfere on the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis" ahead of her recent trip to China. The U.S. Campaign for Burma, echoing a statement from Amnesty International, called on Hillary Clinton to retract the statement.

"Secretary Clinton's statement is beyond dismaying. If the United States is not willing to press China on human rights, no one will," said Jeremy Woodrum, co-founder of the organization. "We urge her to retract her statement and make it clear to China that human rights are a top concern for the United States. In particular, Secretary Clinton must demand that China do more to free Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners in Burma, and demand an end to crimes against humanity committed by Burma's military regime."

China is the most important backer of Burma's military regime, providing weapons, supplies, and diplomatic protection at the UN Security Council.

US reviews Burma policy

During her recent Asia trip, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated that the United States is reviewing its policy toward Burma. Gordon Duguid, deputy spokesman at the US State Department, confirmed the review at a press briefing on 20 February, "Our Burma policy is under review. We are looking at ways in which we can try to affect the leaders in Burma," Duguid said.

However, he confirmed that US sanctions on Burma would remain. He said, "the goal remains the same in Burma, and that is to have a representative government that responds to the will of the people, and that will needs to be freely expressed. So at the moment, is there any change on the U.S. sanction regime on Burma? No, there is not."

New censorship system in Burma exposes 2010 Elections sham

A new electronic censorship system in Burma exposes the lack of reform that can be expected after elections in 2010. In February 2009 Major Tint Swe, Director of the Press Scrutiny and Registration

Division at the Ministry of Information, announced that the regime will be moving from a paper based censorship system to digital censorship system.

The move to an electronic system of censorship will require significant investment in computers and other equipment. The regime employs hundreds of censors.

“To invest significant resources and time in this new censorship system, just one year before elections, exposes the fact that there will be no change under the new constitution,” said Mark Farmaner, Director of Burma Campaign UK. “Free media is an essential part of any democracy, but there will be no freedoms for the media, censorship will remain.”

Majority of under-five deaths preventable - UNICEF

Most deaths of children under five are preventable or treatable in Burma, according to the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF). About three-quarters of all deaths occurred in the first year.

“Over two-thirds of child deaths could be prevented by inexpensive but proven high impact services like immunisation, better case management with antibiotics, insecticide-treated bed nets, supplementation of Vitamin A and other micronutrients,” said Osamu Kunii, chief of health and nutrition at UNICEF.

The Burmese military junta spends just 40 cents per citizen each year on health care. While 40 percent of Burma’s annual spending goes to the military, only 3 percent goes to health care.

ILO: Forced labor getting worse

The International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) Executive Director, Kari Tapiola, visited Burma in February to extend for another 12 months the ILO’s cooperation agreement with the Burmese regime for processing forced labour complaints.

However, despite work done by the ILO, there has been no reduction in the use of forced labour in Burma. The ILO liaison officer in Rangoon Steve Marshall said that while forced labour by civilian authorities might have declined, the use of forced labour by the SPDC military was getting worse. In February, three villagers died while performing forced labour.

UK tour operators using businesses linked to regime

UK tour operators going to Burma are using hotels and resorts with known links to Burma’s brutal military dictatorship, according to a new report by Tourism Concern. This includes tourism establishments blacklisted under European Community (EC) sanctions because they are owned or directed by members of the regime and regime associates. It also includes tourism establishments which are managed by the regime in partnership with foreign companies under joint venture schemes.

Tricia Barnett, Director of Tourism Concern, says: “It is the responsibility of tour operators to ensure that they abide by the European legislation and do not provide financial benefits to the military dictatorship, which continues to perpetrate appalling human rights abuses against its own people. Given lack of transparency in Burma and the complex overlap between state- and private-owned enterprises, the best way to do this is simply to stop trading with Burma”.

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