

Burma-India relations: A betrayal of democracy and human rights

A summary of the key issues relating to Burma and India

Published by the Burma Campaign UK – March 2007

ABOUT BURMA

Burma is ruled by one of the world's most brutal military regimes, a dictatorship charged by the United Nations with a "crime against humanity" for its systematic violation of human rights against their own people. The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in Burma's 1990 election. The result has never been honoured.

Facts about Burma:

- One of the highest levels of forced labour in the world.
- Rape is used as a weapon of war against ethnic women and children.
- More than 1,100 political prisoners, many of whom are routinely tortured.
- More child soldiers than any other country in the world.
- Nearly half the government budget spent on the military.
- One in ten babies dying before their fifth birthday.
- Over 60% of Burmese people living in poverty.

After Burma's current military rulers, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), seized power in 1988, the regime used revenue from foreign trade and investment to double the size of the army while at the same time reducing spending on health and education. Burma now has the lowest spending on health in the world.

INDIA AND BURMA

Due to a strong historical and geographical connection between the two countries, Burma and India have traditionally had a very close bond in terms of trade, commerce, political philosophy, religion and culture. This changed following the brutal military crackdown against the democracy movement in 1988, but relations began warming again in the mid 1990s, and in the past five years India has become increasingly close to Burma's dictatorship.

'India has shamelessly put its own economic and political interests before human rights and democracy in Burma.'

India is now cooperating closely with the Burmese regime in politics, trade, investment and military affairs. What is becoming known as India's 'good friend' policy towards Burma's dictatorship has been causing concern not only amongst Burma's democrats, but also those countries in the west that support Burma's democracy movement. India's political policy towards Burma is uncritical, and India provides important military and financial assistance that helps to keep the regime in power. India has shamelessly put its own economic and political interests before human rights and democracy in Burma.

This briefing highlights the key issues relating to Burma-India relations, and the main areas of concern with current Indian policy.

A BRIEF HISTORY

India was the first neighbouring country to criticise the Burmese military government during the 1988 people's uprising. The Indian Embassy in Rangoon actively supported the pro-democracy student activists and many entered India for shelter after the military coup in 1988. From 1988 to 1990, India followed a policy committed to open support of the forces of democracy and "complete disengagement" with the ruling military junta in Burma. India even gave the Jawaharlal Nehru Award to Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Burma's democracy movement.

'Today there are three main factors that drive India's foreign policy towards Burma. Human rights and democracy is not one of them.'

In the 1990s India started reviewing its foreign policy towards Burma. Relations between India and Burma became warmer, to the point where the two countries are now cooperating in promotion of trade and investment, sharing intelligence, countering insurgency on the border and checking narcotics smuggling across the border. Moreover, India regards Burma as an economic bridge to the rest of the Southeast Asian countries through its border in the northeast.

Today there are three main factors that drive India's foreign policy towards Burma. Human rights and democracy is not one of them. Instead, India has prioritised economic interests, particularly access to Burma's significant gas deposits, its desire to counter Chinese influence in Burma, and its need for co-operation from the regime to help tackle insurgents in the north-east of India, some of whom have bases across the border in Burma's jungles.

INDIAN POLICY – MAIN AREAS OF CONCERN

TRADE, INVESTMENT AND LOANS

Economic interests have been a major factor driving the closer relationship between India and Burma. India is becoming one of Burma's largest export markets. India and Burma have set a \$1 billion bilateral trade target in 2006-07, up from \$557 million in 2004-05. Both countries are looking at cooperation in a host of areas, including agriculture, IT, automobiles, textiles, telecommunications and oil & gas.¹ India views Burma as a gateway to Southeast Asian markets while enhancing its regional cooperation with neighbouring countries.

India is also becoming one of Burma's largest investors, investing in sectors such as oil and gas, agriculture, fisheries, pearl cultivation, infrastructure, mining and tourism.

The most significant investment is India's involvement in the massive Shwe gas project, which will include a gas pipeline running to India. Indian companies ONGC Videsh (Oil and Natural Gas Company Videsh, India), and GAIL (The Gas Authority of India, Limited., India) are partners in the gas project being led by South Korea's Daewoo.² The project is expected to become the regime's largest single source of earnings, providing, on average, US\$580 million per year for the regime for twenty years, or US\$ 12 billion. This doesn't include contract fees to regime-owned Myanmar Oil and gas Enterprises (MOGE), and several other bonuses that could be paid to individual generals.³

History appears to be repeating itself. As with the Yadana and Yetagun gas projects, there are already reports of increased human rights abuses in the area.

¹http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/News/Economy/Foreign_Trade/India_Myanmar_set_1_bn_trade_target_in_2006-07/articleshow/1619335.cms

² <http://www.shwe.org/>

³ Supply and Command: Natural gas in western Burma set to entrench military rule, page 11

India has also proved the regime with a series of loans for infrastructure and other projects, including a \$7 million loan to Burma for two telecom projects and announced a grant of \$3 million for IT-related ventures in April 2005,⁴ and another \$37 million in loans in March 2006.⁵

ARMS SALES

Over the past 10 years India has increased military cooperation with the Burmese regime and today sells and even donates military equipment to Burma's generals.

India's air force chief, S.P Tyagi, offered a multi-million dollar aid package to Burma's military when he visited Burma's new capital Nay Pyi Taw on November 22, 2006. This aid package includes counterinsurgency helicopters, avionics upgrades of Burma's Russian- and Chinese-made fighter planes, and naval surveillance aircraft. In early 2006, India sold two BN-2 Islander maritime surveillance aircraft that it had brought from the United Kingdom 20 years ago. India has also sold T-55 tanks and 105mm artillery pieces to the Burmese regime.⁶

One of the reasons for arms donations and sales is India's concern about insurgents in the northeast of India who have bases inside Burma. India has given arms to the regime in return for the regime cracking down on insurgents.⁷ There are serious concerns that once the regime has finished the crackdown on insurgents it will use the weaponry in its war against ethnic civilians.

There are similar concerns relating to India's offers of assistance of

counterinsurgency aircraft and tactics, including supplying Dhruv and Lancer light-attack helicopters manufactured by Hindustan Aeronautical Limited (HAL). Helicopters such as these are designed to attack targets on the ground.⁸

POLITICAL POLICY

China's growing influence in Burma, both politically and economically, is of great concern to India. China has provided Burma with more than US\$200 million in economic assistance and has helped with the development of infrastructure, including the construction of roads, railroads, airfields, ports and dams throughout the country.⁹ India's desire to counter this influence has led to a policy that is completely uncritical of the regime. Even China has called for change in Burma, but India refuses to make any demands for change. When the Indian President, Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, visited Burma in 2006, he did not mention political problems or the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi.¹⁰ India has also banned senior members of the democracy movement, such as Dr Sein Win, prime minister of the government in exile, from visiting the country.

TREATMENT OF REFUGEES

There are currently around 70,000 Burmese refugees residing in India. Most are in north-eastern states, in particular Mizoram and Manipur.¹¹ As the relationship between India and Burma warmed, the Indian government made life increasingly difficult for many refugees, even arresting and deporting people.¹²

India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Any refugee who enters India without authorization is considered an illegal immigrant, and can face up to five years' imprisonment. Moreover, India denies the

⁴<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/apr2005/india06.shtml>

⁵http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0WDQ/is_2006_March_13/ai_n16105303

⁶ <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/12/07/india14778.htm>

⁷<http://www.kanglaonline.com/index.php?template=ksho w&kid=463>

⁸ <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/12/07/india14778.htm>

⁹ http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/GB11Ae01.html

¹⁰ <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2006/11/14/oneworld-south-asia-exiled-burmese-urge-india-to-rethink-its-burma-policy-rahul-kumar/>

¹¹ <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2006/08/04/keralanextcom-chin-burmese-refugees-in-india-air-woes/>

¹² <http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/hrfeatures/HRF78.htm>

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) access to most refugees and does not permit outside scrutiny of the situation facing many refugees.¹³

Many Chin people in Mizoram are not recognised as refugees, as the UNHCR requires refugees to come to its Delhi office for recognition - a condition most refugees, who are very poor, can't comply with. Most refugees face significant hardship, with some receiving a nominal subsidy from the UNHCR, and many nothing at all.¹⁴ Most Burmese refugees work in low wage industries, such as at tea stalls and factories in and around Delhi. Prostitution is common, with many Chin women forced into the sex industry.¹⁵

CONCLUSION:

India's current policy towards Burma is devoid of any ethical or moral considerations. The world's largest democracy has shamelessly abandoned Burma's democracy movement. They have put short-term political and financial gains before the promotion of human rights, and democracy, and in so doing have abandoned principles laid down by Gandhi and Nehru.



¹³ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/54/274.html>

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<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2006/08/04/keralanextcom-chin-burmese-refugees-in-india-air-woes/>

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<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2006/08/04/keralanextcom-chin-burmese-refugees-in-india-air-woes/>