

Burma Issues

January 2007

Volume 17 Number 1



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Photo Saw Eh Na

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the new look Burma Issues newsletter.

We have said farewell to 2006 and are looking forward to a fabulous year in 2007. Last year we were not able to print all editions of the Burma Issues newsletter however they are available online in both html and PDF format. Please visit our newsletter archive on our website at www.burmaissues.org/En/monthlyarchives.html.

This year we are looking forward to bringing you 12 editions of the Burma Issues newsletter (one for each month). Our aim this year is to continue bringing you excellent articles on Burma, with deep analysis of the situation, using information from the field. We are also looking to increase the number of articles written by people from Burma, as well as encompassing a more diverse ethnic perspective (through contributions and a monthly column). We hope that this will raise awareness of the different ethnic groups in Burma and aid ethnic groups in building unity between different ethnic cultures. Additionally, this newsletter aims to be a medium for the grassroots people to speak to the international community – empowering people to use their voices.

We thank you for your support over the past year and we hope that it will continue throughout 2007.

Sincerely

The Research and Publication Team

Burma Issues is a publication of the Peace Way Foundation and is distributed on a free-subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned with the state of affairs in Burma.

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EVOLUTION OF RESISTANCE: A LOOK AT BURMA'S RESISTANCE MOVEMENT BY MOO KO HTEE

Throughout history power has come at the barrel of a gun. People have been oppressed and liberated by the same weapons. And while the saying might be “the pen is mightier than the sword”, the majority of people would rather go into battle with the sword than the pen. In the case of Burma there has always been resistance to the rulers of the country, whether they were monarch, colonial, elected or self-appointed. While the armed resistance has always been well documented it has overshadowed the non-violent resistance offered by the populace throughout the history of the country.

Prior to colonisation by the British, which began in 1824 and was completed in 1885, there were numerous territories and kingdoms in Burma. The Burman kings who controlled the lowlands claimed sovereignty over the surrounding mountain areas however; the kings for the most part did not invest much effort in controlling these areas. Rather the local inhabitants of these mountainous areas sent tributes to the kings and the areas acted as a buffer zone between the lowland kingdom of Burma and neighbouring countries.

As result this created what is called state and non-state spaces, wherein the state spaces were controlled directly by the kings and while they claimed sovereignty over non-state spaces however lacked the ability to enforce it. Consequently the people in the non-state spaces (predominantly the ethnic areas) were never assimilated into the Burman population and this contributed to them developing an independent identity.

This independent identity was further developed under British rule, where ethnic populations were treated differently from the Burman majority. In the central areas of Burma, where the population was mainly Burman, the British ruled directly, whereas the administration of the frontier areas, predominantly ethnic areas, remained with traditional leaders under loose supervision. As a result of this different treatment, different actors within Burma viewed colonial rule differently: some members of the ethnic minority groups sometimes refer to colonial rule as the golden times, while parts of the Burman population see it as a period of oppression.

As the Burman population grew frustrated with colonial rule, anti-British tendencies and pro-nationalist sentiments grew. A movement for an

independent Burma began, employing a range of different tactics, including but not exclusively students protests, nationalistic writings in newspapers and magazines, countrywide strikes and the formation of political and nationalistic organisations. A group of 30, later to be known as the 30 Comrades and the basis of the Burmese Independent Army, left Burma in search of military training in order to lead an armed struggle for independence. While it was speculated that this group had gone to China, they actually received training from the Japanese army. When the Japanese invaded Burma during the World War II and ousted the British colonial government, they were widely helped by the 30 Comrades and the Burmese population who believed that they would receive independence in return. However, this was not the case. Instead the Japanese severely oppressed the people and created a lot of hardship. Meanwhile the British prepared their comeback to Burma, with assistance from the ethnic nationalities, and the Burmese armed forces. Together, they ousted the Japanese.

After World War II the British returned to Burma in hope to re-establish their colonial rule. Confronted with a strong nationalist movement however they soon came to realise that this would be an impossible undertaken and granted independence to the Burmese population under one condition: the new nation-state would have to include all ethnic groups.

Following independence the Burman majority dominated the political institutions, marginalising the ethnic minorities. The state framework did not create a sense of political equality for all the ethnic groups and nationalities, leading to tensions among the different actors. There were attempts to quell these tensions; however these attempts were not successful. And the central Burmese government faced escalating insurgencies from a number of different groups, including ethnic nationalities, such as the Karen and Karenni, and groups with different ideological views, for example, the Communist Party of Burma.

Against the backdrop General Ne Win, who had been appointed as the head of the Burmese army in 1949, stages a military coup in 1962.

Despite the coup the armed resistance movement continued and in the early 1970s General Ne Win introduced the Four Cuts Policy a counter insurgency strategy. However, instead of targeting the armed groups it was aimed at the civilian population, who were a support base for insurgent groups. The policy was designed to cut resistance groups from four essential supplies: recruits, food, intelligence and finances (that they received from the civilian population) in the hope to diminish the armed group's ability to effectively resist the Burmese army.



1988 Protests calling for Democracy

As a consequence, minorities living in resistance areas were inevitably regarded as potential insurgents or sympathisers and thus the civilians became targets of military counter-insurgency campaigns. Any kind of human rights violations was conceived as legitimate by the army, if it was considered necessary to ensure the integrity of the country. Forced relocation, burning of villages, destruction of crops and rice fields, confiscation of property, rape, torture and murder became part of the military operations leaving local people impoverished and traumatised. Those who refused to move to relocation sites experienced gross violations of their human rights and at times were shot on sight. On the other side, those who did move faced acute shortage of medicine and other necessities in the relocation sites.

Since 1988 the regime has sought to consolidate the Burmese state, and has employed a tactic of territorial control to achieve this goal. The Burmese army, which has rapidly expanded, to the largest army in Southeast Asia, has begun capturing and holding territory that they never had before. In the late 1980s, early 1990s the Burmese army gained control over most of the Thai-Burma border areas. Cross-border trade and the taxation of this trade, was the main form of income for armed groups. The loss of the control of borders meant not only the loss of territory, but also income, which has had a considerable impact on the armed resistance movement.

Within the armed resistance movement it is widely acknowledged that they will not resolve all the issues through violence. Armed groups among the ethnic nationalities started using violence because they felt that they could not resolve the situation through peaceful methods. The tactics of Burma's armed resistance movement were never based on a strategy of overpowering the *Tatmadaw* (the Burmese army) and taking control. Instead Burma's armed resistance movement, which



groups from most ethnic nationalities engage in or have done so previously, see themselves as defending their land and people from the State and the State's efforts to control and oppress them.

However, not all the resistance in Burma is armed. There is a very powerful movement which is trying to achieve change without using violence. This non-violent movement encompasses the entire country and a very significant portion of the population. It is also present outside Burma's national borders. Burma's non-violent resistance movement comes in many different shapes and sizes, and in some cases is very well hidden, almost to the point of invisibility.

In 1988 there were mass protests from the people of Burma calling for change. This form of resistance provided the populace an outlet to express their anger and frustration at the military dictatorship. The sheer size of the protest and the fact that participants came from all walks of life, students, monks, government officials and soldiers to name a few, only further compounded their calls for change. These protests demonstrated the will of the people for change in a non-violent manner.

**“...PROTESTS
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Since then the people of Burma have held numerous protests calling for some kind of change, whether it is for the release of political prisoners, for a transition to democracy, or just for action against the worsening economic conditions within the country. Protests, big or small, have become a part of Burma's non-violent resistance movement.

In the years following the 1988 protests Aung San Suu Kyi became the face of non-violent resistance in Burma. Since entering politics in 1988, she has made speeches to the masses and led the National League for Democracy to victory in the 1990 election. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has served two terms under house arrest (she is currently under house arrest for the third time) and has been imprisoned for over 11 years in total. At the moment she is being held virtually in solitary confinement, and has rejected offers from the generals to go into exile. Throughout her time under house arrest, and the periods between her incarcerations Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has maintained her calls for dialogue with the generals and that the solution to Burma's political situ-

ation can be found through a non-violent means. She is viewed as such a thorn in the side of the generals that they refuse to refer to her by name, but rather as “the Lady”.

While Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the most internationally recognisable form of resistance to the Burmese military junta - she is the only Nobel Peace Prize laureate in the world to be incarcerated - there are also other groups and individuals carrying out a variety of non-violent resistance activities within Burma and externally.

One such example is the ongoing information warfare. This is a campaign offering alternative information to counter materials published by the State Peace and Development Council (the Burmese military junta), which are often nothing more than propaganda. People from Burma are fighting this propaganda by providing alternative materials to the international community and to the villagers inside Burma. This process actually begins at the grassroots level with villagers documenting their own situation, either formally and informally, sharing this information with groups, which is then disseminated to the international community, as well as back into Burma.

This alternative information campaign is a form of non-violent resistance to the military rule in Burma. By documenting the situation and providing a real analysis of the situation it enables people to fully understand what is happening and to act accordingly. In addition to the information warfare, there is constant lobbying and advocacy efforts occurring around the world for Burma.

And these efforts are not in vain. Last year the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) held two informal briefings on Burma and put Burma on the UNSC formal agenda. While the increased involvement of the UNSC in Burma's affairs is a result of numerous contributing factors, lobbying and advocacy played an important part.

While the efforts of lobbying and advocacy are mainly occurring outside Burma, there are many different forms of non-violent resistance happening within the national borders of the country. When looking at resistance inside Burma, especially in areas where armed conflict is still ongoing, it is important to realise that there are more than two actors (the State and the armed groups) involved. Villagers play a significant role in resisting oppression and the militarisation of their lives, and it is necessary to see them as active participants and to acknowledge that fact. They are not collateral damage, caught between two fighting parties. To class them as such is disrespectful and disempowering.

However, some of the resistance tactics employed by villagers are conscious and others are very much unconscious. Those that perform uncon-

SHOOT ON SIGHT

THE ONGOING SPDC OFFENSIVE AGAINST VILLAGERS IN NORTHERN KAREN STATE

Burma Issues is proud to announce the released a new special report and video both entitled Shoot on Sight: The ongoing SPDC offensive against villagers in northern Karen State.

This report and video documents the horrendous situation that villagers in Toungoo, Nyaung Lay Bin and Muthraw Districts are facing, and includes testimonies from villagers and prison porters affected by this offensive. Through this military campaign, which began in November 2005 and still continues, villages have been shelled with mortars, looted and burnt to the ground. Crops and food supplies have been destroyed. Burmese soldiers are ordered to shoot on sight, regardless of whether it is a combatant or a defenseless civilian. As a result more



than 27,000 people have been forced from their homes, either hiding in the jungle or trying to find refuge in Thailand. The Burmese army continues to increase its military presence in these areas and carry out attacks against villagers. Thousands of lives have been affected by this offensive, and many have been lost – all valuable and irreplaceable.

This report is a collaborative effort between three Burma Issues projects: our Human Rights Documentation unit, the Video team and the Research and Publication project. Field staff from the Human Rights Documentation and Video projects interviewed villagers from the offensive area throughout 2006 and the information that people gave provided the foundation for this report and the video. A visual insight is given through the video in which IDPs are shown during their struggle to survive and the report includes information on the offensive, reasons behind the attacks and focuses on the impacts that this campaign has on the grassroots people, the region and international community. It also calls the international and regional communities (including ASEAN and Burma's neighbours) to action and the action that we and the people affected by this offensive are calling for is increased international pressure on the junta, so it stops attacking the civilian population and to increase humanitarian aid to the people in need.

The report can be downloaded from the Burma Issues website at

<http://www.burmaissues.org/En/reports/OSP.pdf>

The video can be viewed online at the website at

<http://www.burmaissues.org/En/video/shootonsight.html>

To receive a free copy of either the report or video please contact us via email at burmaissues@burmaissues.org

(we do ask for a donation to cover the postage costs if outside of Thailand)

To view other reports and videos produced by Burma Issues please visit our website at

<http://www.burmaissues.org>



scious acts of resistance do not usually actualise the impact of their actions instead they often see them merely as a means of survival. Some argue that unconscious resistance is not real resistance, because it is not organised and does not have the objective of undermining the system. Others thinkers believe the opposite. We believe that ones actions, whether they are organised or not, or have the objective of undermining the system or not, should be considered resistance and need to be acknowledged as such. In short, unconscious resistance is still resistance.

In areas of active armed conflict, after decades of military attacks and offensives, villagers have developed a number of coping strategies that aim to minimise the impact of the SPDC's violence and abuse. Villagers monitor troop movements through a number of different channels including displaced villagers passing through their area, pre-established communication networks among local communities (for example regularly meeting with members of different communities to share information), civilian security guards and opposition troops. These early warning systems enable villagers to prepare and flee before SPDC troops arrive, avoiding the threat of violence and human rights abuses.

In addition to early warning systems, villagers also establish a number of household risk management practices that include: hiding food supplies and crops, preparing an emergency evacuation procedure, moving location, working at night to avoid detection and paying fines and complying with forced labour orders. Villager level risk management plans are also established, in which the community works together and pools their resources in order to avoid the SPDC troops.

The non-violent tactics employed by the people have become the biggest threat to local and regional SPDC power in the eyes of the regime. The SPDC has realised that if they want to gain control over the entire area and population they need to attack the villagers, not the armed groups. Ever since the SPDC managed to gain control over most of the border areas in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is not longer armed groups that are seen as the strongest form of resistance to the junta, but the people. By defying forced relocation orders, bribing officials to avoid forced labour quotas and fleeing to the jungle rather than being controlled, the villagers are staging their own resistance movement. One Karen human rights activist said "in the past people saw themselves as ordinary villagers who needed the KNU (the Karen National Union) to resist the military government –now villagers see that they are responsible for resisting the regime and that they don't have to be a soldier to offer resistance".

One example is the offensive in northern Karen State which has been ongoing since November 2005. Northern Karen State has always been a stronghold for the Karen resistance to the junta's rule. This resistance does not just involve the KNU's and KNLA's fight against the SPDC and its predecessors, but also the people's struggle and desire to be free from oppression and to have control over one's life and future. In the ongoing military attacks the Burmese army is targeting villagers and their survival structures, not the Karen National Liberation Army (the armed wing of the Karen National Union).

One of the most powerful images of resistance is that of the student standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square in 1988. In the image a lone student with his arm raised stands in the way of a tank, and the tank stops. Rumour has it that the student's friends dragged him back into the crowd and no one knows what happened to him. While his identity remains a secret, the knowledge that a person can stop a tank has become an iconic image of the 20th century and an inspiration for others.

Every single day people in Burma stand in front of a metaphorical tank with their arms raised: some days they stop the tank, and others they are run over, flattened, killed. However the next day, another person is standing waiting to stop another metaphorical tank. Their resistance is powerful, and this resistance now overshadows the fire of guns, mortars and landmines. It is a resistance in people's hearts and minds, which is something that will continue when the body is broken.

However, this resistance is not unwavering. When your family is suffering in front of your eyes it is difficult to continue, and that is why we need to support the people of Burma in their resistance to oppression. This support does not need to be large or extravagant, but rather heartfelt and sincere, it can as simple as signing a petition, writing a letter or holding moment of silence. This support can make the difference to people who have been struggling for generations.



Action Alert

To act please go to the Burma Issues website (www.burmaissues.org). At the Burma Issues website you can learn more about the situation in Burma, and find out more about what you can do to help. You can download post-cards and drafts of letters to send to politicians and the UN calling for action. You can also sign an online petition that will be sent to the UN Secretary General, UN Security Council Members and ASEAN Secretariats.

ETHNIC SOLIDARITY

KACHIN

BY S DOHERTY

Kachin State is situated in the mountainous far north of Burma. It borders India to the north-west, Tibet to the far north and China to the east.

The name Kachin covers a number of sub-groups. The largest are the Jingpaw and the Hkahku. Other groups include the Marus, and the closely related Lashi and Atsi, the Nung, the Rawang and the Lisu.

The military prowess of the Kachins was well known and in the late 19th century the colonising British began to recruit Kachins into their own armed forces. Kachin units served under the British in both the First and Second World Wars, earning the tag "the Ghurkas of Southeast Asia".

The Kachins have also been notable for their receptivity to Christianity. Today the majority of Kachins are Baptists, with substantial communities of Catholics in some areas. Before the arrival of the missionaries in Kachin areas in the 1870s animist beliefs predominated, and ancient spirit worship survives in some mountainous areas.

Agriculture is the traditional economic activity of Kachin communities, with rice, maize, tobacco and vegetables being the main crops. Opium is also produced. They also rear domestic animals and supplement their diets with fish and game hunted during the cold season from December to February. Men clear and burn the forest plantation areas, while women are responsible for tending and harvesting crops. The traditional economy also included gold, silver and jade.

Traditional dress for women includes intricately designed skirts with embroidered jackets, adorned with rows of small silver disks. Men usually wear Burmese-style longyi colored in green and purple, with padded Shan shirts. Shoulder bags and swords are also carried.

Kachin social structure has a number of unique features. The Kachin are one of the few groups in Burma to have surnames, inherited in the same way as in the west. Society is characterized by an elaborate clan system. The clan which can be viewed as a huge extended family is far more important than the core family. Membership of a clan denotes kinship and familial relations as well as whom one may or may not marry. Today, the kinship system persists, and is a major reason why the Kachins have managed to retain a remarkably cohesive society.

NEWS BRIEFS

India and Burma: India has promised further military aid to Burma's ruling junta and asked for increased cooperation in fighting Indian insurgent groups operating along its border with Burma.

General Thura Shwe Mann made specific requests for military hardware during his visit to New Delhi last December. According to Mukherjee, Burma had requested service and parts for its MiG fighter jets. He added, however, that since the jets were supplied by Russia, prior consent from Moscow would be required.

Mukherjee said "I told them that it will be possible to supply them certain equipment so that defense cooperation is expanded."

United Nations Security Council: China and Russia blocked the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) from passing a resolution proposed by the USA that would demand an end to political repression and human rights violations in Burma.

The vote was 9-3 in favour of the resolution, with South Africa joining China and Russia in voting against the resolution. Even though the resolution had enough votes to pass, China and Russia vetoed the resolution. Three countries, Indonesia, Qatar and the Republic of Congo abstained from voting.

Russia and China argued that the UNSC was not the proper forum for discussing Burma because the country does not threaten international peace.

ASEAN: Southeast Asian countries will not step in to defend Burma from US attempts to push the United Nations towards declaring Burma's authoritarian rule a threat to regional peace, an official said.

ASEAN secretary-general Ong Keng Yong said Burma should fulfill a long-standing pledge to democratize and release all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi.

ASEAN has repeatedly conveyed reminders to Burma about political reforms and the release of political prisoners. "We continue to call, they may continue to fold their arms, but we have to continue to call," Ong said.

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BURMA ISSUES/PEACE WAY FOUNDATION

Burma Issues was founded in 1990 as a private non-profit organization devoted to peacefully addressing Burma's struggle for human rights and democratic rule. Burma Issues operates under the umbrella of the Peace Way Foundation. The Peace Way Foundation was given legal status as a non-governmental organisation in 2002.

Our organisation believes that all ethnic groups within Burma have the right to equality in all areas of life and to live in a society free from ethnic chauvinism. Burma Issues' bottom-up approach to building a grassroots movement plays a significant role in offering non-violent participatory solutions that come from the people inside Burma's grassroots communities. The movement's work directly confronts chauvinism by introducing sustainable, just alternatives to their situation.

Our aim:

To participate in building up a people's movement of the marginalised people that is capable of carrying out the long-term struggle necessary to bring a true and lasting peace with justice to Burma.

Our objectives:

- ◆ To systematically document the events of the past and present them through a documentation centre, in order to do effective analysis and to create strategies for building a better future. This will focus on information for the internal movement and for external supportive campaigns.
- ◆ To build up activities who have a vision for true change in Burma, are responsible and disciplined and are clear in the nature of their commitment for the long-term struggle.
- ◆ To encourage grassroots people to lead the struggle for social, economic and political change in Burma.
- ◆ To build up international awareness and support for the struggle in Burma by acting as a bridge between the grassroots people and the international support community in such a way that the grassroots people help international support groups focus actions on the critical issues which prolong the country's cycle of war.

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SILOM POSTOFFICE
BANGKOK 10504
THAILAND

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

PRINTED MATERIALS

AIRMAIL