



2010 : 3

# Burma Action Ireland

## Newsletter

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## BURMESE ELECTION: FROM ASTROLOGY TO BLOGGING

Everyone, especially in Burma, knows that the outcome of the election called for 7th November is a foregone conclusion. The SPDC – whatever they may call themselves – are certain to win and continue in power. The new constitution guarantees this as it provides the Army with a quarter of all parliamentary seats, plus key posts such as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. It was forced through in a referendum in 2008 just after Cyclone Nargis had devastated the country, but that didn't stop the regime from claiming over 90% of the vote. Actually, we understand that many votes were already in before polling day, and so victims of the Cyclone apparently voted – even dead ones. There is no reason to expect that the forthcoming election will be any fairer or more transparent than the referendum.

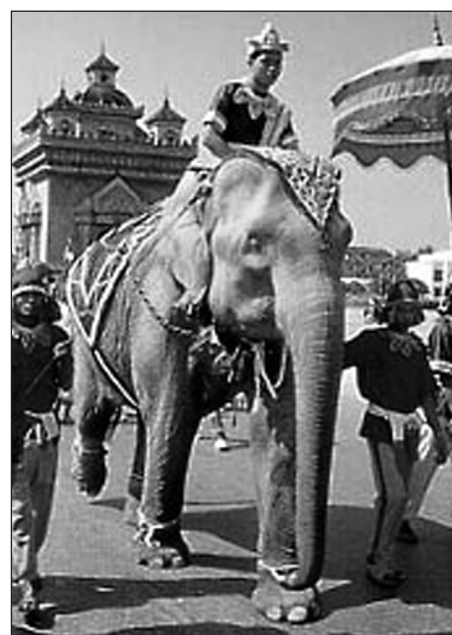
Yet there is a ferment of interest and even expectation beneath the surface of Burmese society. Nobody under the age of 38 in Burma has ever had the opportunity to vote in an election, and the younger generation is determined to expose the sham. The brave bloggers, who defied the regime and told the world about the Saffron Revolution in 2007 and then again exposed the deliberate neglect of the junta towards the victims of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, are preparing to monitor the sham election and reveal to the world the full extent of the fraud. They intend to 'get information out' in spite of the risk of imprisonment and torture if they are caught by the Junta's goons. They are the Citizen Journalists (CJs) of Burma and they are formidable in their ability to 'keep one step ahead' of the Junta's electronic surveillance.

Even with the cast-iron guarantee of victory conferred by the new Constitution, Than Shwe is apparently not confident about the future of his dictatorship. His choice of 7th November for the election seems to follow an astrological promise:  $7+11 = 18$ ,  $1+8 = 9$ . Nine was Ne Win's, lucky number; and Than Shwe seems to be modelling himself on Burma's earlier military dictator.

Leaving no stone unturned in his quest for reassurance, Than Shwe recently consulted astrologers in India who told him that he 'would have to receive a white elephant with royal ceremony in Naypyidaw to gain victory for all of his plans for ruling Burma continually.' Accordingly, his henchmen were sent out to find a white elephant – from April to June they searched – lo and behold! A white elephant was duly discovered on 26th June and brought to Naypyidaw for the Royal Ceremony on 10th

August. To outsiders, this may seem a puzzling redundancy of white elephants, as three already live in Rangoon.

Not content with his Royal White Elephant, Than Shwe's regime has now banned five areas of Burma from voting at all. The areas of Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Shan and Wa people have been excluded from voting on the grounds that they 'are not in a position to hold free and fair elections,' according to the official newspaper, the *New Light of Myanmar*, impervious as usual to the irony. There also is continuing uncertainty over the number of 'parties' which will stand for election. Last month, there were 47, but with recent deletions it now appears that there are 37 parties planning to take part. Doubtless this number is also subject to alteration before November 7th. Almost all of these 'parties' are funded by the SPDC, with a mere handful of genuinely democratic parties putting up candidates – as brave as the bloggers, since they also risk immediate imprisonment.



*Ceremony for a White Elephant.*

### BURMA'S "THREE PRINCESSES"

Whereas Aung San Suu Kyi has been debarred from standing, and her party the NLD is boycotting the election, among the candidates standing for the New Democratic Force are three so-called "Princesses" (or as the generals say, one quips, "three witches"): Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein, Nay Ye Ba Swe and Mya Than Than Nu. Just as Suu Kyi's father, Aung San, was the hero of Burma's independence from Britain in 1948, so all their fathers served as prime ministers during the 14 years of democracy until the military coup of 1962. Friends since childhood, they regard Suu Kyi as a sister, and are saddened that she cannot take part. But they

hope the election, though deeply flawed, may prove a first step in a very slow progress toward restoring democracy. Though constantly harassed and watched by the military and their spies, rarely able to meet, and on a shoestring budget, they are never-

theless campaigning hard to persuade their frightened compatriots to vote. Their own determination is not diminished by the dangers. Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein, for instance, was jailed in 1990 (like her father, mother and two brothers earlier) and spent 7 years in Rangoon's Insein prison, "a horrible place to live, like hell". Mya Than Than Nu too saw her father U Nu, after three terms as premier, imprisoned and driven into exile. But before his death he told her: "You must go back to work for your own people", and she is acting on his plea.



*Burma's "Three Princesses".*





# BURMA COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

Ireland has now joined the growing number of countries pressing for a UN Commission of Inquiry into Crimes Against Humanity in Burma. Such a Commission was recommended in March this year by the UN's Special Rapporteur, Tomás Ojea Quintana, and in a report by the Irish Centre for Human Rights commissioned by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, *Crimes against Humanity in Western Burma: The Situation of the Rohingyas*. A DFA spokesman said: "We remain actively engaged at national, EU and international level in monitoring the situation in Burma and in our efforts to support the Burmese people in their struggle for democracy and human rights."

The call for a Col has also been supported by Australia, the US, UK, Czech Republic, Slovakia,



Tomás Ojea Quintana

Hungary, Canada, New Zealand, France, Lithuania and the Netherlands.

# INSIDE BURMA

## Burma's Environment Under Threat from Multinationals

At a major conference in Bangkok on 18th September, delegates heard that multinational companies are seriously damaging Burma's natural environment in their exploitation of resources. The natural ecosystems are being wrecked by 'developments' favoured by the Burmese military government, but which will bring little or no benefit to ordinary citizens. Over 20 mega-dams for hydro-electricity are under construction, or planned, on Burma's chief rivers, attracting as many as 30 companies from China alone. Mining, oil and gas projects, gem and precious metal extraction, all attract multinational investments with companies from India, South Korea, as well as ASEAN members Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand investing. The UK remains one of the chief investors in Burma, while Russia and Italy also have interests.

In order to facilitate these 'developments', the Burmese Army uses forced relocation, forced labour, torture and extrajudicial killings. The conference heard how the social and environmental costs of these projects are borne disproportionately by the most vulnerable groups of people living near the projects, including women and indigenous peoples. Refugees are often forced to escape from Burma into surrounding countries, where they fall easy prey to unscrupulous, low-pay and illegal practices.

The conference called on ASEAN to develop an effective legal framework that requires full corporate accountability to reduce the social and environmental consequences of their

investments in natural resource extraction, including large-scale hydropower dams, and mining, oil and gas projects as well as to develop an extractive industry framework to guide member countries.

## Death of Thakin Ohn Myint

One of Burma's staunchest fighters for democracy, a colleague of General Aung San and mentor to his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, has died in Rangoon aged 93. He served as Vice-President of the National League for Democracy for many years. A journalist and publisher, he was imprisoned when Ne Win took power in the coup of 1958, and detained in the Coco Islands (penal colony). He energetically supported Aung San Suu Kyi and the pro-democracy movement during the 1988 mass uprising, and for this he was detained in July 1989 when the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) seized power in a coup. He spent the following three and a half years in jail. The current military regime (SPDC) jailed him at the age of 80 for another three and a half years, when he was arrested along with other former student leaders for compiling a history of the Burmese student movement.

In his book, *A Taste of Prison*, Ohn Myint encouraged his colleagues not to be intimidated by the 'imperialist dictator'. He recounted how they chanted slogans inside the jail. All his political life, he met with young activists to bridge the generation gap. In 1997, he contributed to the BBC documentary, *Who Killed Aung San?*

# THAN SHWE ON 'CHARM OFFENSIVE' TO NEIGHBOURS

General Than Shwe (head of the SPDC), has recently embarked on a couple of charm offensives with neighbouring India and China, in a bid to develop ties and schmooze support for the sham elections in November.

In July, the General toured sites of Buddhist and Hindu interest in northern India, while also signing trade and investment deals. He also found time to tour a Tata motors factory –the Indian conglomerate is establishing a factory in Burma, due to open next year. The core purpose of his visit however was to brief the Indian government on the upcoming elections in Burma and to convince them to continue their recent, shameful stance of neutrality to governance issues in Burma. Previously India supported the claims of the elected parliament to govern Burma, but abandoned this stance as rivalry with China climbed up the ladder of political calculation. The General's visit was accompanied by protests from Indian democrats and exiled Burmese.

In September, the General went to Beijing for a visit which was to be "the same but different". Unlike India, China is an enthusiastic supporter of the sham elections; having been discommoded by refugees flooding across the Burmese border earlier this year, they are also keenly watching their investments in Burma. During the visit, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao underlined the importance of respecting Burma's sovereignty (although he made no reference to the sovereignty of the parliament elected 20 years ago without being allowed to take power).





# EXTORTIONATE TAXATION BY JUNTA

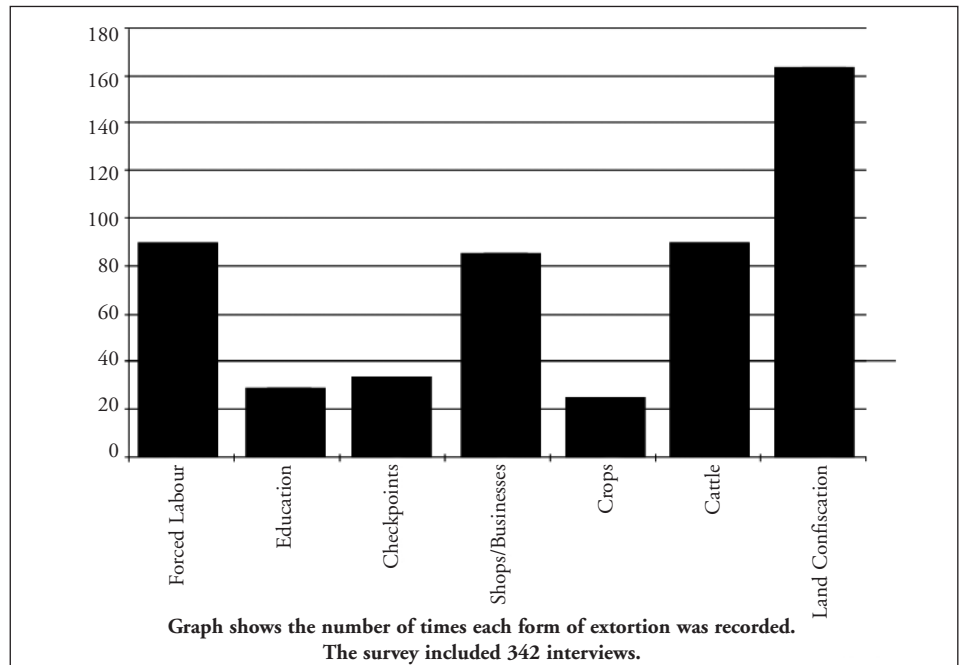
A new report from ND-Burma reveals that the taxation system in Burma is profoundly unfair and oppressive, like all aspects of rule by the SPDC Junta.

ND-Burma is a coalition of 13 organisations collecting information about Burmese society. Their new report is based on interviews with 342 people from different backgrounds. It identifies key injustices in the current system and makes recommendations for reform.

The most striking injustices are the "Live off the Land" policy which is used to fund the Tatmadaw; arbitrary taxes levied by local authorities; and fines levied by the police.

Devouring over 60% of the National Budget, military funding is central to the Burmese taxation system. According to the "Live off the Land" policy, local Army commanders collect arbitrary revenues through levies, checkpoints, property seizures, livestock/food seizures, forced labour or whatever other means they can devise. In effect, this mandates local military units to pillage defenceless local populations who have no right of redress, and no way to predict their future tax liabilities. Depending on the level of military activity in the area, the harvest could be seized, or else an entire farm expropriated and sold to the highest bidder, leaving civilians with no certainty to plan for their futures.

Town Councils, Village Councils, and even some of the ceasefire groups are also entitled to raise



revenue. New taxes are imposed without any consultation or even notice to the population, who often have to borrow money to meet sudden demands. The report notes the gap between the tax collected and the value of services provided to the civilian population. Finally, the report identifies the prevalence of unfair fines as a means of raising revenue within Burma. Civilians are often fined for reasons

beyond their control, plunging entire families into destitution. Falling asleep on sentry duty, failing to provide forced labour or simply being the victim of an arbitrary arrest can result in severe fines. It is clear from the completely arbitrary and ad hoc approach to taxation in Burma, that this is not a system of taxation in the understood sense, but is rather State-controlled extortion.

## Book Review:

Benedict Rogers, *Than Shwe – Unmasking Burma's Tyrant* (2010) Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, Thailand  
ISBN 978-974-9511-91-6

This is a very timely book. In tracing the rise of Than Shwe, Rogers not only gives great insight into Burma's tragic slide into its present dire condition, but also brings together a great deal of background information which is less commonly understood. With the sham election in Burma only a few weeks away, and the expectation that the Tyrant will continue to rule under the pretence of a civilian government, Ben Rogers' expert analysis of Than Shwe's rise to power is of the most intense interest.

From his opening chapter, 'From Postman to Tyrant', Rogers makes it clear that Than Shwe has never displayed any leadership qualities or special acumen. Rather he is shown to be a persistent, dull and obstinate personality, lucky to have been out of the limelight when more talented men have been mown down. His most outstanding personal quality now that he is old seems to be rapacity. He has acquired immense

personal wealth. It is not simple greed, however – he is reported to like plain food. The accumulation of wealth seems to be his ruling passion. Rogers shows that he is equally indulgent of this quality in others as well – his army cronies and some civilian businessmen, like Tay Zar. The position of Burma as the second-most corrupt regime in the world (after Haiti) seems to reflect Than Shwe's own grasping nature.

Rogers gives an excellent account of the rise of the Burmese Army from the time when Ne Win deposed the democratic government and established military rule. This is extremely useful in understanding the enormous power the Army wields now in Burma. He establishes that Than Shwe has no political ideas of his own, but is basically carrying on with Ne Win's programme, which began the ruin of Burma's economy in the 1960s. Like Ne Win, Than Shwe is carrying out an appalling policy of ethnic cleansing, called 'burmanization,' against non-Burman ethnic minorities, like the Karen, Shan and Chin peoples. In analysing the regime's bizarre refusal to allow aid to reach the victims of Cyclone Nargis, Rogers implies that the fact that many of the victims were Karen motivated Than Shwe's tardy and inadequate response. Rogers even suggests that it was the

unfavourable comparison of the Burmese response to the Cyclone disaster, with the response of the Chinese Army to the Sichuan earthquake, that drove Than Shwe to make his late, brief visit to the Delta. He is particularly trenchant on the regime's theft of aid sent by the international community to assist victims of the Cyclone, citing a figure of \$10m stolen in currency exchange. He reveals that UN agencies which have tried to work in Burma expect to lose up to 17% of the value of their aid into the pockets of the SPDC.

There is an immense amount of excellent information in this book, and it is written in a clear, sensible style which makes it fascinating to read. I strongly recommend it to anyone who is concerned about Burma's future as well as her present travails.



Senior General Than Shwe.





## BAI NEWS

### Freedom Cycle

This July saw a band of intrepid cyclists led by BAI veteran Maurice Hurley embark on an epic journey from Kerry to Donegal. The "Freedom Cycle" was supported by BAI and BAI coordinator Caoimhe Hughes was there at every stop along the way. Radio and newspaper interviews were held with local media along the route. In Mayo, Karen refugees turned out in traditional dress to welcome the cyclists with song and some accompanied the cyclists for part of the route. BAI would like to thank all of the cyclists involved for allowing us to campaign on the back of their true grit, and especially Maurice Hurley for organising this ambitious event.

### Funding Crisis Looms

Burma Action Ireland is facing a serious reduction in funding which may soon begin to impact on our levels of activity. Unfortunately, the grant we have been receiving from Irish Aid for a number of years has been completely cancelled. Other sources of funding are also down for the year. Even with the profits from the concert (See special report), this leaves a major gap in our annual budget. For this reason, the Executive Committee would urge members to support our upcoming fundraising events. A Table Quiz is being organised (see below), and backpacking and other fundraising efforts are anticipated for the coming months.

As part of the fundraising drive, BAI is offering members the chance to purchase some unique items:

*Posters of the recent ASSK Concert* featuring the striking portrait of ASSK designed specially for the concert are available for purchase (A3 size) Price: €50

*Framed photographs* of Burmese refugees,

taken by Cork photographer, Philip Daly, are also available. These are part of a series prepared during the visit of Simon Coveney TD to the Thailand border camps and they were part of our photo exhibition which toured Ireland for over a year. Price €120

*Tee-shirts* featuring the iconic face of Aung San Suu Kyi are available in a range of sizes. Price €15.

All enquiries to  
info@burmaactionireland.org

### School Visits

Burma Action Ireland provides a schools visitation service whereby we can provide an informed member of the organisation to visit school classes of any age to speak about Burma and answer questions. As the new academic year starts if you are a teacher or if you know any teachers who would like to avail of such a service, please contact BAI to discuss a possible school visit this academic year.

### BAI Table Quiz & Raffle

**7th October:** BAI will be holding a Table Quiz and Raffle in Doyle's Bar on Fleet Street, Dublin 2. All profits will go towards BAI and an enjoyable night is anticipated. Teams are for 4 people and it costs €40 to enter a team. First prize will be €100.

So why not shake off the recession and make a night of it with your fellow BAI members and other competitors? No booking required. All welcome.

If you would like to donate a prize or help us to source some prizes for this event, then please contact any member of the Executive Committee or the Coordinator: 087 126 1857 -

info@burmaactionireland.org

## How you can help

### Protest against the oppression of the Burmese people and the detention of Daw Suu Kyi

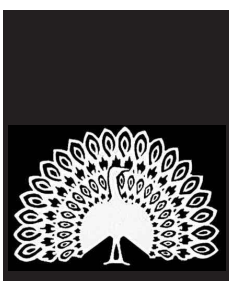
Write appeals to the Burmese military regime, calling for the safe release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all Burmese political prisoners including Buddhist monks. Please ask the SPDC to take action on the following:

- To end the continuing violations of the human rights of citizens, in particular forced labour, forced relocations, abuse, torture, sexual violence, exploitation and abuse in detention and summary executions, often committed by military personnel,
- To end the systematic forced displacements of persons and the flow of refugees to neighbouring countries and create adequate conditions for their safe and voluntary return and complete reintegration, and to allow humanitarian personnel safe access to assist their return and reintegration.

### Please address your action letters to the following:

Senior General Thein Sein,  
Prime Minister, State Peace and  
Development Council, Naypyitaw,  
Union of Myanmar.

*BAI would appreciate it very much if you could send us a copy of your letter(s).*



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Disclaimer: The views expressed herein are those of  
**Burma Action Ireland.**

Burma Action Ireland is a voluntary group established since May 1996 to raise awareness in Ireland of the current situation in Burma and the nature of the ruling regime.



Hon. President:  
John Boorman

Chairperson:  
Keith Donald