



2010 : 4

# Burma Action Ireland

## Newsletter

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## BURMA'S PREDETERMINED ELECTION MARKED BY FRAUD

November 7th marked the first elections in Burma since Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won an overwhelming victory in 1990, which was never honoured by the ruling military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). These 2010 elections are the fifth step of the regime's own so-called seven-stage "Roadmap to Democracy," a process that has been fundamentally flawed from the outset and has resulted in the 2008 Constitution which legitimises military rule.

The electoral laws imposed severe restrictions on parties contesting the elections. Political parties were forced to pay heavy registration fees, had their movements restricted and campaign

materials censored, and their candidates were subjected to intimidation. The main pro-junta party, the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP), populated by recently retired military officers, started campaigning in 2009 and benefited from the financial support of business cronies and use of state resources.

A total of 1,157 seats were contested in the elections: 326 out of 440 in the People's Assembly; 168 out of 224 in the National Assembly and 663 Division and State Parliamentary seats; the remaining seats were reserved for military officers who are to be appointed directly. 14 seats were not filled through the electoral process as the regime cancelled the polls in some ethnic areas,

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## Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Released from House Arrest

On 13th November, the Lady (as Aung San Suu Kyi is known throughout Burma) was released from house arrest, to the joy of her supporters waiting outside her house in Rangoon. She maintained her total commitment to them, and to the cause of Burmese democracy, emphasising the need for reconciliation in the country. This has been her consistent message to the junta, through all the years of unjust and unjustifiable detention which she has endured.

However, fears are already being expressed that her liberty may quickly be denied to her. She has stated that she will not renege, and it is unlikely that the junta will seek reconciliation with any genuinely democratic parties. Although the sham election has been greeted by China and ASEAN as a step towards democracy, in fact it has barely whitewashed junta rule. It has brought their new Constitution into operation, which guarantees military dominance in all branches of government and confers immunity upon the generals against prosecution for the appalling human rights violations they have inflicted on the population.

Nonetheless, her release has given Burma fresh hope which is sorely needed. As the worthy daughter of the national hero, Aung San, she is uniquely qualified to lead her people towards true independence.



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi greets her supporters on her release. Credit: Mizzima.

## Ethnic Minority Groups Clash with Burmese Army

An estimated 20,000 civilians fled across the border into Thailand, following clashes between the Burmese Army (Tatmadaw) and Karen rebels on 8th November, the day after the sham election. Further clashes were reported two days later forcing a further estimated 1,900 civilians to flee into Thailand, where the Thai authorities have allowed them temporary refuge. Since then, many have been returned to Burma in spite of the continuing volatility of the situation.

There are fears that more clashes will occur with other ethnic minority groups, including the so-called 'cease-fire' groups which the Burmese junta tried to force to integrate into a new Border Guard Force (BGF) under the 'one nation, one army' Constitution. Ironically, this seems to have brought the ethnic armed groups into closer agreement, as 'Our enemy's enemy is at least our friend', according to an officer in the Karen National Union (KNU). Karen armed groups are forming a loose, tactical alliance to counter attacks from the Tatmadaw in Karen State, including Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and Karen Peace Force (KPF) troops. There is also a mutual understanding with Shan, Wa, Kachin and Mon armed groups.

The increased unrest reflects the disenfranchisement of 1.5 million ethnic minority voters in the sham election of 7th November. The Burmese junta denied hundreds of villages the vote, on the grounds that their areas were too dangerous for voting to take place. Other disenfranchised groups, especially refugees outside Burma, and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) whose villages have been destroyed by the Tatmadaw, are even more numerous.

In New York on 9th November, representatives from the recently-formed ethnic armed groups' Committee for Emergence of a Federal Union, consisting of the Chin National Front (CNF), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), KNU, New Mon State Party (NMSP), and the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N), and Burmese opposition parties including NLD, asked the United Nations (UN) to help resolve the country's ethnic issues.



Karen fleeing from attacks by Burmese military at Myawaddy. Credit: Karen Information Center.



# Burma's Predetermined Election Marked by Fraud

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thereby disenfranchising about 1.5 million voters. The overall results show that the USDP won 78% of the vote or 845 seats. The two main opposition parties contesting the election were the National Democratic Force (NDF), which took 1.5% of the vote, resulting in 16 seats and the Democratic Party which won 3 seats.

The USDP's victory was a foregone conclusion, given the pre-election conditions set by the military, but now reports of widespread electoral fraud have also emerged. Independent election monitoring was banned and media coverage was severely restricted. Ordinary Burmese citizens and activist networks have reported ballot stuffing, flawed voter lists, lack of secret voting processes and illegal campaigning. The SPDC Censorship Board banned local media from publishing reports about election fraud and irregularities. SPDC officials and USDP supporters threatened and harassed journalists and reporters trying to cover the vote.

Reports indicate that booths at polling stations did not allow voters sufficient privacy to cast their votes. Many voters were told by polling station officials how to vote or had ballots cast in their names. Large numbers of voters in ethnic nationality areas found that their names were not on the electoral rolls when they went to the polling stations. In Mon state, SPDC officers or polling station officials refused to issue or sign ballots of voters who were not USDP members. Other reports highlight instances of votes being invalidated because of mistakes by polling station

staff and USDP supporters voting repeatedly under other eligible voters' names. The Kachin News Group reported USDP members stuffing ballot boxes with about 100 ballots marked for the USDP at a polling station in Kachin State. Ballot boxes at polling stations were not adequately secured.

Other incidents of electoral fraud include illegal campaigning by USDP inside polling stations, USDP members acting as polling station officials, vote-buying by USDP and the refusal by USDP supporters in Arakan State to distribute relief aid to victims of Cyclone Giri who were not USDP members.

Members and supporters of opposition parties have complained that local SPDC officials, Election Sub-commission members, polling station officials and USDP members harassed, detained and discriminated against them and prevented them from monitoring the vote.

But in many electoral areas, it was the addition of large numbers of advance votes for the USDP that tipped the balance in favour of its candidates. In the days before the election, local SPDC officials, polling station officials, and USDP



*Burmese Protesters in Bangkok – Voting Burmese Style. Credit: Radio Free Europe.*

members throughout the country solicited advance and proxy votes from civil servants, soldiers and their families.

Given the climate of fear in which these elections were conducted, estimated figures for voter turnout of 50-60% are remarkably low. It is not clear to what extent the limited balloting was due to the NLD's call for an election boycott, to electoral apathy or to the belief that the elections would not change anything.

Genuine democracy is no closer for the people of Burma. It is time for the United Nations to initiate meaningful dialogue between the regime, the democracy movement and the ethnic nationalities leading to national reconciliation and democracy.

## INTERNATIONAL PRONOUNCEMENTS ON BURMA

The multiple shortcomings of Burma's sham elections had been identified in advance by democratic nations worldwide, and were further denounced on polling day and thereafter, for instance in statements by both President Obama and Hillary Clinton, by the European Union (via its High Representative Catherine Ashton), and by the Foreign Ministers of France, Ireland and Britain. Like the latter, all said in essence: 'We know the result of these elections is already a foregone conclusion. They will not be fair, free or inclusive,' but we 'will stand by the people of Burma and will continue to maintain pressure on the regime until we see real progress in democracy, governance and human rights.'

China, in stark contrast, warmly welcomed the election. For a foreign ministry spokesman, it

had been carried out in a 'steady and smooth manner,' and was 'a critical step for Myanmar in implementing the seven-step roadmap in the transition to an elected government.' The Prime Minister of Thailand, though asserting its readiness to provide humanitarian assistance to the thousands of Burmese who had fled the fighting that followed, and adding: 'We want to see peace and order... reconciliation,' reiterated its policy of non-intervention in 'Myanmar's domestic affairs.' India's similarly neutral stance was criticised by Mr. Obama on 8th November in an address to its parliament: 'It is unacceptable to steal an election, as the regime in Burma has done again for all the world to see.'

More broadly, he attacked India's silence on the junta's gross abuses of human rights. That issue

is sure to surface at the UN's Security Council, under Britain's presidency this month, when as announced by William Hague it discusses 'the situation in Burma/Myanmar following the elections.' A draft General Assembly resolution, tabled by the European Union and co-sponsored by 42 countries, demands that the regime release all political prisoners and engage in a 'genuine dialogue' with the democracy movement and ethnic nationalities, end the use of child soldiers and the displacement of ethnic civilians, and grant citizenship to the Rohingyas. Regrettably, it goes no further than paving the way for the establishment of the UN Commission of Inquiry proposed by its Special Rapporteur and supported by at least 13 countries.



# INSIDE BURMA

### CYCLONE GIRI

Rakhine State (Arakan) in western Burma suffered a disastrous onslaught from Cyclone Giri on 22nd October, affecting an estimated 260,000 people, with 76,000 made homeless. Thankfully the death toll is low, especially compared with the appalling loss of life inflicted by Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

The UK Government has announced £3 million in emergency aid for the area, to be given to trusted aid agencies and not the junta. The British Secretary of State for Development said: 'This disaster was in danger of being forgotten, ignored and unseen by the international community.' The Burmese elections have distracted attention away from the devastation.

### TENASSERIM DEVELOPMENT

A contract worth \$8 billion has been signed by the biggest construction company in Thailand, Italian-Thai Development, with Myanmar Port Authority, for a project at Tavoy, Tenasserim. The three-stage contract is for a deep sea port with ship building and maintenance facilities, petrochemical works including oil and gas refineries, as well as other industrial uses. It will be the largest single foreign investment development project in Burma. Work will begin next year and is expected to take 10 years. Burmese state media announced simultaneously that Burma's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) would be established on a 100,000-acre (40,000-hectare) plot around Tavoy. When the port upgrade is completed, goods bound for Thailand, China, Vietnam and Laos will be able to cut an average of 10 days off transport time, as cargo will no longer be required to pass through the Strait of Malacca.

Humanitarian concerns have been expressed regarding the project. As with other industrial development projects in Burma, local people

may be forced to pay a heavy price for the project, with land confiscation, forced relocation and forced labour.

### DIAGNOSIS: CRITICAL – NEW REPORT ON HEALTH IN EASTERN BURMA

*DIAGNOSIS: Critical - Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma*, a new report on health in Eastern Burma from Dr Cynthia Maung and her team, reveals that people in the conflict-affected areas of Eastern Burma, particularly women and children, are suffering poor health, comparable to Sierra Leone. This results from official disinvestment in health, protracted conflict and abuse of civilians by the Burmese military. The junta spends half of the national income on its defence budget, but only 1.8% of the total budget on health, placing Burma in 138th position in the UNDP's Human Development new report for 2009.

The report, which surveyed more than 27,000 people in Eastern Burma, shows that over 40% of children suffer from malnutrition and 60% die from preventable diseases such as malaria, diarrhoea, tuberculosis and cholera. One woman in 14 is infected with malaria, and one out of 7 children dies before the age of five. The maternal mortality rate is triple the official figure for the rest of Burma. Almost one third of those surveyed experienced human rights abuses in the preceding year, particularly forced labour and displacement. The report also states that the abuses link directly with the health crisis, as children in displaced families are three times more likely to suffer.

'Unless the human rights violations are stopped in Burma, the health problems cannot be solved,' stated Dr Maung, who won the Magsaysay Award for her humanitarian work. 'We want the international community to consider this as a

## One Prisoner Released, 2,202 still in Gaol

Deceptively little has changed for Burma, in spite of the elections: civil and human rights abuses continue, especially in border areas; the opposition is largely under arrest or in exile; the new legislature, even if it were free to operate, would have little impact on a regime that simply ignores the law; the same thugs are in charge, only now they have anointed themselves with faux-democratic titles.

Nonetheless, while there was no tectonic shift on November 7th, not everything is as it was. Notably, the elections have hived off some of the democratic forces into the junta's own process. There they will be able to test the new system from the inside for any potential it may have as a reform platform, but ultimately they will be operating inside a rigged system devised by the military for the purpose of perpetuating military rule.

The real wild card for the future is the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, which hopefully will last for a while this time. She still retains support from democratic forces inside and outside of the Parliament, and the scenes following her release confirm the massive personal appeal she has with the people of Burma. However, her chief strength is the massive public support for the democratic forces and widespread disgust at the sham election process. But this is a precarious position to operate from in Burma. If public anger is stoked too far, then expressions of discontent could easily escalate into protests, provoking the predictable backlash from the junta and an almost certain defeat for the democracy movement. On the other hand, maintaining the lively threat of public protest is the only effective tool she has against the junta, so she is committed to 'ride the tiger' of public outrage for the time being. It is a difficult balancing act to achieve in the current heated environment, especially when the junta hold all the real cards.

Both the junta and Suu Kyi have a common interest in preventing outrage at the elections from escalating into bloodshed. Therefore the generals would be wise to accept her offer of talks aimed at reconciliation, if only to diffuse public resentment at their corrupt rule. However, wisdom is not an acknowledged trait of this regime.



Burmese Health Care. Credit: US Campaign for Burma.





# Report on Celebratory Concert for Aung San Suu Kyi's 65th Birthday on 19th June 2010 in the National Concert Hall

In July 2009, I asked Christy Moore if he, as a fellow 65er would consider performing at a concert on 19th June 2010 to celebrate Aung San Suu Kyi's 65th birthday. Without hesitation he said yes, he'd be honoured. The Niall Toner Band, Declan Sinnott, Brendan Graham, Deirdre Purcell, Carmel McCreagh, Damian Gorman, Noel Eccles, Neil Martin, Fiachra Trench and Eamon Dunphy came on board as soon as they were asked, all before the year ended.

We set up a production committee early in 2010 comprising Gearóid Kilgallen and Eileen Seymour from BAI, Sinead Troy and Alex Donald both of whom have lifelong experience of music production and PR and myself. We were fortunate in getting Morgan Weymes to design the poster which was widely praised. It graced 50 sites in Dublin for 6 weeks. We were also lucky to have Nik Quaife and Zoetrope PR work on promotion. In April and May, the Dublin Gospel Choir, Tommy Halferty and Marian Finucane were approached and graciously agreed to appear – when I apologised to Marian for giving her a long list of announcements and introductions, she said, "Keith, on the 19th June, you're my boss, so no apologies necessary!" Indeed this selfless, generous attitude came from everyone involved. It's truly great to work in an environment where egos don't get in

the way.

The night was brilliant – a true highlight for many of us. The National Concert Hall was full and the concert ran smoothly and on time, thanks to Eileen, Sinead and Alex back stage. DVB sent a camera crew and the night was filmed.

Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday helped BAI raise awareness in the following media: RTÉ 6.01 and 9pm news, the Arts Show on BBCNI, 4FM, LyricFM, TV3, The Irish Times (3 pieces), The Dubliner, the Sunday Independent, The Star (twice), BBC World Service, TodayFM, The Marian Finucane Show and Niall Toner's programme on RTÉ radio, The Temple Bar Newsletter, 7,000 flyers, 50 huge posters and the Gerry Anderson programme on BBCNI.

Thanks to everyone who appeared on stage, including all the Burmese people who travelled from Mayo, Carlow and Antrim for the concert and to all who sent birthday messages for Aung San Suu Kyi. And all those people behind the scenes – Norman Verso, Keith Cookman, Brian Trench, Philip Kinane, the BAI volunteers who passed out so many flyers, all the NCH staff who were so helpful, Frontline, DVB, O'Brien's caterers, Paul Farraher, the Temple Bar Cultural Trust and, most importantly, ASSK for the inspiration.

(Keith Donald, Chairperson).



Karen and Rohingya people at the Concert. Credit: Margot Ryan.

## BAI TABLE QUIZ

Burma Action Ireland held a fundraising table quiz in Doyle's Pub, College Street, Dublin on the 7th of October. BAI would like to take this opportunity to thank Doyle's Pub for the use of their room and all the local businesses who sponsored prizes, especially The Landmark Hotel. A big thank you also goes to all those who attended, making it such a great success. We are happy to report that BAI raised €1,230 on the night. Thank you all for your support.

## BAI LAUNCHES NEW WEBSITE

BAI are happy to announce the launch of a new and updated website, with the same address: [www.burmaactionireland.org](http://www.burmaactionireland.org)

The new site is user-friendly and easy to navigate. We have updated all the old content and will keep adding to it as time goes on. Please log on and check out the new website and tell us what you think about it.

Don't forget we also have a **twitter feed** and a **facebook** page, just search for Burma Action Ireland on either of them and you will find us.

## SCHOOL VISIT

On the 9th November, BAI Coordinator, Caoimhe Hughes, visited 1st and 2nd class of Bellurgan National School in Co. Louth to tell them all about Burmese Shan children. Through pictures and stories, the children learned about life for Shan children, they compared the land in the pictures to their home, with its lush green vegetation. They were amazed to hear that the Shan children do not have toys to play with or television to watch. The session then finished with the children making their own Shan Paper Dolls, dressed in beautiful traditional clothing.

## What you can do

Write a letter to the Thai Embassy, appealing to the Royal Thai Government

- To continue to allow people fleeing the fighting inside Burma and afraid to return to conflict zones to remain in temporary shelters in Thai territory
- To continue to allow humanitarian organizations to access and provide essential assistance to temporary refugees on Thai soil as well as internally displaced persons near the Thai border inside Burma

Appeals should be addressed to: His Excellency Mr. Kitti Wasinondh at the Royal Thai Embassy, 29-30 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5JB or by email to [thaiduto@btinternet.com](mailto:thaiduto@btinternet.com).

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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

