



BURMA'S PUPPET-SHOW PARLIAMENT

Any hopes that the opening of Burma's first parliament for over 22 years might signal a tiny step in the direction of democracy have been exposed as extremely naïve. Under the deeply flawed Constitution forced through in 2008, in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, 25% of the seats are reserved for military officers appointed by the ruling junta, the SPDC, and after the patently rigged elections of November 2010 the pro-junta party, the USDP, was declared to have won no less than 77% of the rest. Before the sessions began on 31 January, the junta announced the names of its 388 appointees: 110 to the lower house, 56 to the upper, and 222 to regional and state parliaments. The first task for these chambers was to set up an electoral college; this would then nominate a "civilian" President, who in turn would appoint his own cabinet. Many pundits had predicted that this office would be taken by Senior General Than Shwe, the dictator who has led the junta since 1993, or by his second or third in command; but any of these, in order to assume it, would have had to relinquish his military role, and Than Shwe had other ideas. Instead on 4 February, the parliament assigned the Presidency to Thein Sein, who had been a general and prime minister under the junta but is now the leader of the USD. A week later in his list of 30 ministers, 26 were either retired army officers or had served in the SPDC's cabinet; only 4 were true civilians, and unsurprisingly not one was a woman.

Parliamentary sessions were devoted exclusively to confirmation of such appointments, and no debate was allowed. As the National Assembly Speaker Khin Aung Myint expressly declared: "The Parliament representatives [...] are to discuss any matters in unison. Precious time will be lost if they argue with each other. The Parliament should not be in a debate-like situation." Members' only task was to certify that nominees met qualifications for their roles; they complained that they could not do so, both because most biographies were

incomplete and too little time was allotted; on average sessions lasted less than 20 minutes. Under laws passed by the junta on 19 January, parliamentary questions are severely limited in scope, and must be submitted ten days before the start of a session; members are forbidden any comment deemed to endanger national security or the unity of the country, or to violate the Constitution, and face up to two years in jail if they "write, print or distribute by any means" any parliament-related information.

The new parliament was clearly not given oversight of the new national budget, which had been enacted before it sat and as usual not publicised in the mass media, though announced in the government gazette. Out of the \$8.45 billion allotted, education will receive only \$349 million (4.13%), and health only \$110 million (1.3%), i.e. \$2 per Burmese – despite the fact that, as international studies have repeatedly attested, Burma's levels of maternal and infant mortality, of HIV (AIDS), and of preventable diseases like malaria, tuberculosis and cholera, are among the highest in the world. By contrast, \$1.1 billion (about 13%) will go to the energy sector, and \$2 billion (23%) to defence. Another \$22 million has been earmarked for the office of the SPDC, which many had assumed would now be abolished.

More sinisterly, a secretly enacted law has given Than Shwe, as commander-in-chief of the military, the absolute authority to use unlimited "Special Funds", the spending of which no person or organization can question or audit. At the same time, he has created and staffed a novel institution, not envisaged in the Constitution: a State Supreme Council, expected to provide the new regime with "guidance". All eight members are current or former top SPDC generals, and its leader of course is Than Shwe.

Burma's veteran puppet-master continues to pull all the strings.

Threat of 'Tragic Fate' for Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD

A comment piece in the junta mouthpiece, *New Light of Myanmar*, has spoken of the 'tragic fate' of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her party if they continue to support sanctions against the military rulers of Burma. The piece was followed up the next day by a reiteration of this threatening phrase.

The NLD has called for economic sanctions to be maintained until various benchmarks, including the release of more than 2,000 political prisoners, are met. The NLD noted that "Criticism of sanctions, particularly economic sanctions, sometimes serve to divert attention from the main problems plaguing the country." It added that Burma's economic problems stem from regime policies. The EU is currently making its annual reassessment of sanctions policy on Burma. The United States said that calls to ease sanctions on Burma were premature. It is expected that European leaders visiting Burma will discuss sanctions with NLD and Daw Suu Kyi.



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.



The Plight of Burma's Karen People

The Karen people are the largest ethnic minority group in Burma, with an estimated population of 3.5 million, and a further half a million in neighbouring Thailand. Although many 'lowland' Karen are integrated in Burma's cities and towns, a large percentage – 'highland' Karen – live in the mountains close to the Thailand border; their traditional lands in Karen, Karenni and Kayah states. Even 'lowland' Karen may suffer discrimination by the Burmese regime; for example, since Cyclone Nargis struck the Irrawaddy Delta region in 2008, many people believe that the near-total neglect the survivors have suffered reflects the fact that a large proportion of the Delta population is Karen. Many Karen people are Christian, whereas the state religion in Burma is Buddhism.

Following Burmese independence in 1948, the Karen people rejected domination by Burmans (the main ethnic group in Burma, also known as Myanmarese). Since then there has been armed conflict against incursions into Karen lands by Burmese Army forces, resulting in the world's longest civil war. Since 1996, when their chief stronghold was destroyed by the Burmese, the civilian Karen population has been left prey to the depredations of the increasingly ruthless regime under First General Than Shwe. Human rights violations of every description are committed by the Burmese Army, without any redress for the ordinary Karen people. The situation has recently been described as a form of genocide.

For over forty years, more than half of the Burmese Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been spent on the Army. The excuse for this exceptionally high rate of expenditure has been the need to fight 'insurgency groups' (that is, ethnic minority groups) in the border states of Burma. A policy, once called 'Burmanization' was put in place which still operates today:

- Civilians are the main victims of the Burmese Army campaign and subject to many serious human rights abuses including summary execution by troops, rape, forced labour, summary 'taxes', destruction of food crops, and even being forced to act as human mine sweepers. *The Burmese Army is the only government force in the world still laying landmines.* It also seizes children as young as 12 for soldiers.
- Tens of thousands of ethnic minority villagers in areas along the Thai border are forced to relocate to Burmese Army controlled areas; forced relocations increased significantly after 1996. Internally Displaced Persons include those who go to government (or ceasefire group)-controlled relocation sites, and those 'in hiding' in the jungle. Both groups are subject to on-going human rights abuse.
- The 'Four Cuts' policy cuts the supplies of *food, funds, recruits and information* to ethnic minority insurgent groups by systematically terrorising the civilian population in resistance areas.



Map showing Karen areas of Burma.

HEALTH : FROM “CHRONIC EMERGENCY” TO “DIAGNOSIS – CRITICAL”

The publication of a new report on the dire health situation in Eastern Burma, '*Diagnosis – Critical*' makes it clear that the situation for people in the Karen and Shan states of Burma has disimproved significantly since the last, highly damning, report, *Chronic Emergency* in 2006. The new report based on a survey of more than 27,000 people in Eastern Burma, shows that more than 40% of children suffer from malnutrition and 60% die from preventable diseases, such as malaria, diarrhoea, tuberculosis and cholera. Maternal mortality rates are three times higher than the official figure, with one woman in 14 infected with malaria, and TB and poor nutrition increasing the risk to mothers. One child in seven dies before the age of five.

In the absence of all public health provision in 'insurgency' conflict areas, volunteer local groups do their best to assist the thousands of desperate, displaced people on both sides of the border. In 1998, the Back Pack Health Workers group established teams of

volunteers, trained in very basic medical knowledge, who go into conflict areas carrying 10kg back packs of medical supplies for the ravaged population. They are trained to treat 20 common illnesses, including diarrhoea and pneumonia, as well as malaria, which accounts for a quarter of all deaths in eastern Burma. They delivered 3,600 babies in 2009, and treated 55 gunshot and 17 landmine victims. Since 2000, nine BPHW medics and one traditional birth attendant have been killed by gunfire or landmines. The most recent fatality was last July, when soldiers burned down Thada Dae village in Karen state, and shot a Back Pack medic. When thousands of people fleeing Burmese troops crossed into Thailand in June 2009, BPHW set up the Karen Community-Based Organisation Emergency Relief Committee.

BPHW also helped after Cyclone Nargis struck the Irrawaddy Delta in 2008, sending the Emergency Assistance Team to deliver food, water, shelter and health services. The group's



Back Pack Health Worker.

secretary, Mahn Mahn, says: "These are my people, this is my community. When they are suffering, I have to solve this problem. When there is oppression beside you, you are not free. If someone needs help, is still suffering, you are not free."

DIAGNOSIS: Critical - Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma can be viewed at: www.burmacampaign.org.uk/.../diagnosis-critical-health-and-human-rights-in-eastern-burma

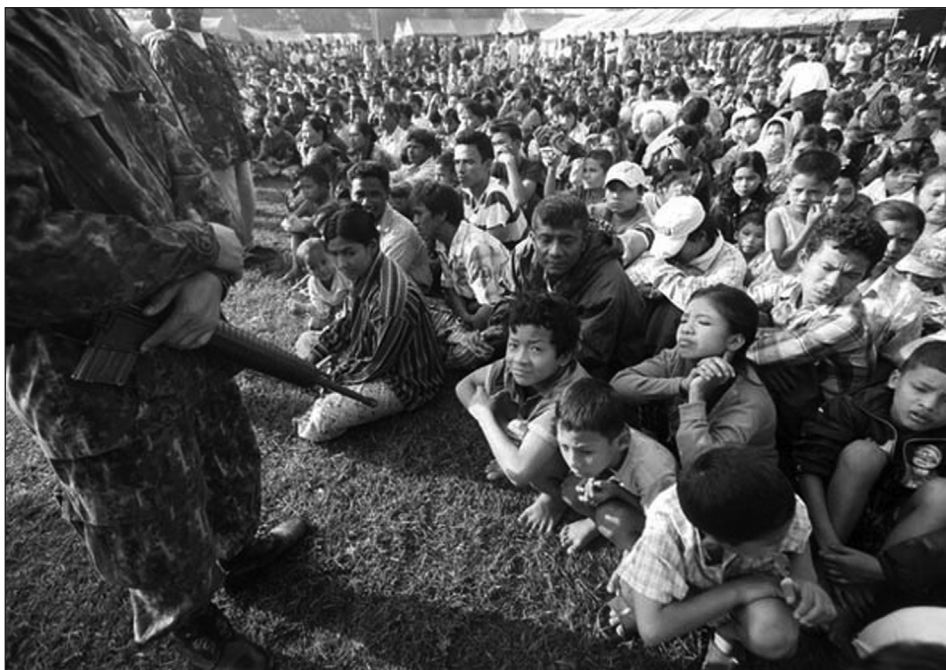


KAREN PETITION TO THE WORLD

The first world-wide Karen Petition, signed by 84,000 Karen people from all round the world and aged from 15 to 103, was presented to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on 6th March 2011. It asks the UN for action against the Burmese military's violation of their human rights and military campaigns against the ethnic Karen people in their own lands over decades. The Petition is also being presented to many other world leaders.

More than 3,600 villages in Karen State have been destroyed by the Burmese over the past 15 years. As recently as last year, 18 Karen civilians were summarily executed by the military and 2,300 were used in forced labour. Over 3,000 Karen villagers have become Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). More than 1,000 armed clashes were reported in Karen territory during 2010.

The Petition requests Ban Ki-moon to put pressure on the junta to negotiate a cease-fire across the country, to hold a serious political dialogue and to build a federal country that can guarantee racial equality and human rights.



Burmese Karen Refugees guarded by Thai soldier in refugee camp, Mae Sot. (Photo: Irrawaddy)

CHINA & THAILAND BENEFIT FROM ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION IN BURMA

A new report, issued on 10th March by the Karenni Development Research Group (KDRG), warns that huge environmental damage, as well as the extinction of a Karen tribe, will result from the development of hydro-electric dams on the rivers Salween and Prawn, on the Thailand border with Burma. The report exposes secret plans by the Burmese government and the state-owned Datang Corporation of China, under a memorandum of understanding signed in January 2010, to build three new dams in Karenni state: the 600 MW Ywathit Dam on the Salween River; the 130 MW Prawn River Dam; and the 110 MW Thabet River Dam to the north of Loikaw. There are plans to build seven dams along the Salween River and its tributaries and most of the electricity generated will be sold to China and Thailand.

Engineers guarded by Burmese soldiers are now surveying for the projects. Further evidence of their progress is the construction of shelters for workers and logging upstream from the dam sites, the report said, adding that local villagers have been told to stay away from the areas under development. In previous similar projects, serious human rights abuses have accompanied such 'development'. Lawpita, the first large-scale hydropower project built in Karenni State, forced

over 12,000 people from their homes. An estimated 18,000 landmines were planted around the site and thousands of Burmese troops came in to secure the project, resulting in human rights violations which included forced labour, rape and extrajudicial killing.

Besides threatening indigenous people, the KDRG report says the projects could fuel conflict and instability in the area, destroying forests and diminishing biodiversity, reduce agricultural production, and cause water surges and shortages downstream. The project would have serious negative impacts on the environment, leading to the loss of up to 50 rare species, according to the co-ordinator of the Burma Rivers Network. No compensation is paid to the indigenous people for the loss of their lands. Ironically, Datang Corporation, the Chinese company involved in building the Karenni dams, belongs to the United Nations Global Compact, whose members commit to conducting business according to universally accepted principles of human rights and environmental and labour standards.

"How can investors think that this is just business as usual when armies are battling all around them and people are fleeing for their lives?" demanded Thaw Reh, spokesman for the KDRG.

INSIDE BURMA

AIDS/HIV INTENSIFIES IN BURMA

According to Medecins sans Frontieres, an estimated 242,000 people are suffering from AIDS/HIV in Burma, but fewer than 20,000 of these can access the drugs which could help them survive. In spite of sharp decreases in the price of these drugs which have benefited many in Africa, people in Burma have little hope of treatment, as the military government spends less than 1.8% of GDP on health. Burma has been described as the 'epicentre' of AIDS/HIV in South East Asia.

RUBY TRADE SLAVES

Recent footage secretly filmed near Mogok in Burma by Al Jazeera journalists shows children as young as four years old engaged in digging for rubies. Local people are unable to defend their lands against the 'miners', supported by the Burmese military, who dig for rubies in their fields. Once the gems have been found, the Burmese government lays claim to the land and most often the hapless landowner is reduced to slavery, digging for rubies for the government.

In 2008, gem auctions raised \$582 million for the Burmese military government, and at a 13-day emporium in December 2010, it took in a record \$1.44 billion, according to a government official.

WORKERS STRIKE IN RANGOON

1,500 workers in the Taiyi shoe factory in Rangoon are reported to be on strike, demanding a living wage. At present they earn less than US\$0.70 per day. In February, striking workers at two garment factories, United World and Oscar's, succeeded in improving their pay and conditions.



Conflict Studies – NI and the Karen

The Global Border Studies project (GBS), a collaboration between staff at Dundalk Institute of Technology, Anglia Ruskin University UK, The Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity and World Education, is approaching its first anniversary. Since May 2010, fifteen students from Burma based in the Nu Po refugee camp on the Thailand-Burma border have been instructed in study skills, technology, migration, conflict, identity, ethnicity, human development and culture. The programme aims to help them to understand ethnic conflict, to develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills, and to become leaders in their communities. Anthony Russell of Anglia Ruskin University and the Borderlands Initiative DkIT, visited the project last month to teach a module on the Northern Ireland conflict. He found the students "most

responsive, eager to learn, to ask and to research the topic". They have been looking at case studies of conflict areas in an effort to understand the factors that lead to war and the processes that can bring reconciliation. The second year programme will focus on peace building theory. The students will also plan, facilitate and evaluate their own development education workshops with groups in Nu Po camp.

DkIT coordinator Margaret Clarke is delighted with progress in the first year of the project.

"We have a very dedicated team who volunteer their time and expertise to the project. The budget is very small but the rewards have been great."

To learn more about the project visit www.globalborders.org or contact margaret@globalborders.org.

BAI NEWS

School visit: On 19th January, BAI's Mary Montaut gave a talk about the situation of children inside Burma to Fifth and Sixth classes at Rathgar Junior School.

A seminar on **Maternal Mortality** in Burma and Africa took place in UCD School of Social Justice on 1st March, given by BAI's Mary Montaut and

Anne Daly, journalist and film-maker.

Crossing Salween at Dundalk IT on 14th March. BAI's Mary Montaut showed this new film about the plight of the Karen to students and staff at DkIT. It was very well received, and good discussion followed among students and staff.

Special thanks are due to Gary Moore of Redrage Films for permission to deploy this splendid new weapon in our armoury.



Members of 5th & 6th Classes, Rathgar Junior School.

EU Commissioner in Thailand to Discuss Burmese Refugees

Kristalina Georgieva, EU Commissioner on Humanitarian Issues, is visiting Bangkok to discuss the situation of Burmese refugees in Thailand. There are estimated to be 150,000 refugees in camps, some of whom fled Burma in the 1990s and recent cuts in international aid have meant that many are now receiving only two cups of rice a day.

The Commissioner is mandated to question whether some of the refugees are 'economic migrants', rather than fleeing other forms of oppression by the Burmese regime, and will explore ways of making the refugees 'more independent.' The EU contributes between 30% and 40% of the foreign aid going to the camps. Some EU states, notably Germany and Italy, are in favour of promoting ties with the Burmese regime, although it criminalizes refugees.

AMNESTY MEETING

Report from Gary Kilgallen

On 17th February a meeting of DU Amnesty International, chaired by Ailbhe Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh, took place in TCD. Executive Director of Amnesty International Ireland, Colm O'Gorman, spoke of the sad plight of the Burmese people, tracing the sequence of savage misrule since the first military coup took place in 1962. Peaceful nationwide demonstrations by students in 1988 resulted in the massacre of up to six thousand persons by the army. Keith Donald, Chair of Burma Action Ireland, spoke of being deeply moved by the courage of Buddhist monks who took to the streets in 2007. This 'Saffron Revolution', motivated by concern for the increasing poverty of people due to rising prices of staple foodstuffs, was also brutally repressed.

Dr Thaug Htun, who represents the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) at the UN, said that neither the recent sham elections in Burma, nor the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, should fool anybody into believing that the regime has any intention of restoring democracy. On the contrary, the rigged elections were specially designed to copperfasten the junta's tight control on power.

The European Union common position on targeted sanctions against the generals must not be relaxed. Furthermore the UN Security Council must respond to the call of UN Special Rapporteur on Burma, Tomas O. Quintana, and establish a Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma.

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. Kitt Wasinondh at the Royal Thai Embassy, 29-30 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5JB or by email to 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

