



AUNG SAN SUU KYI IS STILL THE VOICE OF DEMOCRATIC BURMA

The Burmese generals' decision to release Suu Kyi from house arrest on 15 November last year, six days after the sham elections from which she and her party, the National League for Democracy, had effectively been excluded, was clearly one of many vain attempts to persuade the world that her nation was on the road to liberalization.

They may have hoped that she had been cowed into silence, into ceasing her twenty-two-year-old campaign for democratization, justice and peace, or at least that she would prove a spent force, despite the acclaim of the ecstatic crowds who greeted her re-appearance. If so, the generals have been disappointed; she continues to be active and outspoken.

Within Burma, she has been quietly busy, re-establishing contact with her family, catching up with developments, and reconnecting with her supporters. At her lakeside villa and the NLD's headquarters in Rangoon, she has received a host of foreign diplomats, NGO workers, journalists and party members, has helped to set up educational projects, and is planning what she says will be less a 'campaign' than a 'contact trip'- a series of appearances outside Rangoon. At her 66th birthday party on 19 June at NLD headquarters, she said that her birthday wish was 'for peace, stability and prosperity in the country'. The event was marked by celebrations, not only there but in Magwe, Mandalay and Sagaing Divisions and in Kachin and Arakan States.

Internationally, her voice is being more loudly heard. On 22 June, in a video message to the US Congress's Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, she reiterated her support for the Commission of Inquiry into human rights abuses in Burma, which has been repeatedly called for by the UN's Special

Rapporteur. On 28 June and 5 July, on BBC's Radio Four, she gave that Corporation's first two Reith Lectures for 2011, recorded secretly at her home and smuggled out of the country. On 15 July, a specially recorded message from the Nobel laureate was the main feature of the first of a series of TV programmes initiated (to celebrate its 50th birthday) by Amnesty International.

Her plans to travel outside Rangoon are problematical, for the generals as well as for herself. As one Western diplomat has commented, 'if they make life difficult for her, it's going to be hard for them to continue to claim that this is a new era'. But they have been stepping up harassment and threats against Suu Kyi and her party. A letter of 28 June from the Ministry of Home Affairs told the NLD that its political activities, since its dissolution last September, were illegal and hampered national reconciliation, and an editorial that day in the state-run paper *New Light of Myanmar* warned that 'if Daw Aung San Suu Kyi makes trips to country regions there may be chaos and riots'. The following day, the paper suggested that a 'tragic end' could ensue.

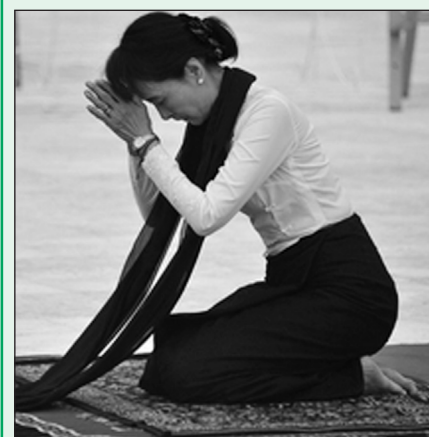
U Kyaw Win, who recently defected as Deputy Chief of Burma's Embassy in the US, has said that the regime's threats 'must be taken seriously'. Daw Suu Kyi herself recalls all too well that last time she campaigned outside Rangoon, in 2003, she narrowly escaped with her life when her convoy was set upon by Government - sponsored thugs, and 70 of her supporters were killed. Nevertheless, on 6 July she flew with her son Kim Aris to the ancient temple city of Bagan. Spontaneously greeted by an emotional crowd some 150 strong, she made no political comments, though later she echoed UNESCO complaints about poor restoration work

on the medieval ruins. No doubt she is testing the waters; she has reason to fear, and admits she does. But as she said in one BBC lecture: 'Freedom from fear does not have to be complete [but] ... only ... sufficient to enable us to continue, and to carry on in spite of fear requires tremendous courage'.

See Amnesty International's programme at www.amnestytv.co.uk and via YouTube. For Daw Suu Kyi's Reith Lectures, see page 4 of this Newsletter.

MARTYRS MEMORIAL DAY

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi attended Burma's **Martyrs Memorial Day** on 19 July, to honour her father, General Aung San, the 'Father of Burma' and his companions, who were assassinated on this day in 1947. The original constitution which they drew up would have enabled ethnic minority groups to leave the Union of Burma. Instead, the military dictatorship of Ne Win and subsequent dictators brought civil war to the fledgling state.



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.



IS BURMA AT WAR?

Thein Sein's soi-disant 'civilian' Burmese government appears to have misjudged the determination of major ethnic armed groups of Karen, Mon, Chin, Karenni and Shan states to resist 'burmanization' – the old policy devised by Ne Win to force the diverse peoples of the 'Union of Burma' into a homogenous mould. In the run-up to the November elections, the military junta ordered that the ethnic minorities' cease-fire groups must transform themselves into 'border guard forces' and serve under their bitter enemies, the Burmese Army (Tatmadaw). The cease-fire agreements had in any case been designed to enable the Tatmadaw to concentrate its aggression against non-cease-fire groups; or indeed, against any group deemed unilaterally by the generals to have broken the cease-fire. This old device of 'divide and rule' was pushed beyond its limit by the generals' diktat that they must give up their arms and serve as border guards for the Tatmadaw.

It is becoming clear that the 'civilian' government is escalating hostilities against ethnic minority groups in many border areas, and stretching even the resources of the 400,000-strong Burmese Army. There is fury among the ethnic minority leaders at the new government's disregard of cease-fire agreements.

Since early June, intense fighting between the Kachin Independence Army and the Tatmadaw has driven up to 20,000 people from their homes. The ostensible cause is the forcible relocation of over a hundred villages to facilitate the construction of the Myitsone Dam by China's Power Investment Corporation. Although many remain internally displaced inside Burma, thousands of displaced Kachin have fled across the border into China, where refugees are far from welcome. At the same time, the three main groups of Karen fighters have also intensified their struggle by attacking towns and army camps, intercepting supply and reinforcement convoys and carrying out 'urban guerrilla-style' bombings and shootings in towns. Meanwhile, the Shan armed groups have also intensified their resistance to the Burmese Army and have joined forces with the United Wa State Army, forming a large theatre of war south of Lashio. In a new development, the chief ethnic minority armed groups have now formed the United Nationalities Federation Council (UNFC) which is demanding a cease-fire



EU delegates met Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon on 21 June.

across the whole country and real political dialogue to establish a genuine, permanent peace. 'If the border areas are really part of the 'Union of Myanmar,' the government needs to stop fighting in Karen, Shan and Mon states. That will be the only way to establish a permanent peace,' the new Council stated in a letter to the Burmese government on 8 July. In June, the UNFC requested China to act as mediator to achieve dialogue with the Burmese government, but the response of the Burmese authorities was to order the Kachin group to restore its cease-fire, and deny that Burma is effectively at civil war. On June 17 the Chinese Foreign Minister called on the parties in conflict to remain calm and exercise restraint so as to avoid an escalation of the situation, saying: 'We urge them to resolve their differences through peaceful negotiations.' He was speaking at a news conference in Beijing, following reports that China was closing its border to refugees fleeing from the conflict.

The U.S. has also called for a halt to the fighting between the Burmese Army and ethnic Kachin fighters in the north of the country, and with Karen and Shan fighters along the Thai border. A spokeswoman from the State Department expressed increasing concern over reports of human rights abuses in these areas, involving casualties, widespread rape and the displacement of thousands of people. A recent survey by the UNHCR placed Burma fifth in the world as a source of refugees, with only warring countries in Africa driving out larger numbers.

The UNFC is also appealing to the EU to assist in starting meaningful negotiations,

following a visit to Rangoon by a high-level EU delegation. However, the EU has failed to step up to the mark and refused to comment so far on the ethnic minorities' request. The extent and intensity of their resistance suggest that it is becoming increasingly futile for the Burmese government to deny that the country is descending into civil war.

TOURISM & SANCTIONS

In a long statement, Daw Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, has reluctantly changed its stance on tourism to Burma. It now welcomes responsible tourism that does not cause human rights abuses and environmental degradation in the country. It endorses foreign visitors, but requests them to avoid government-run businesses, hotels, etc. and instead to seek out ways to support the Burmese people when they spend their holiday money. At the same time, it would seem that international opinion is softening on the subject of sanctions against the Burmese regime. Although the EU Common Position on Burma was retained in April, there are fears that it will be extremely difficult to secure the necessary unanimity at the next round. This suggests that the Burmese government has effectively deceived the international community with its façade of 'democratic reform.' In spite of maintaining sanctions, even the United States has been telegraphing that relations with the 'new' Burmese authorities could be improved if they would address humanitarian issues, such as the detention of over 2,000 political prisoners. The recent visits by EU officials and by Hillary Clinton would seem to imply an erosion of the international community's more honourable stance on human rights violations and dictatorship in Burma.



INSIDE BURMA

MYITSONE DAM 'HARMFUL & UNNECESSARY' SAYS NEW ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

Although it was exclusively funded by the China Power Investment Corporation which is building the huge Myitsone Dam in Kachin State, a new report on the development claims: 'There is no need for such a big dam to be constructed at the confluence of the Irrawaddy River. The seven enormous dams will impact the lives of thousands of Kachin people and destroy the local ecological balance, including the likely loss of endangered species such as the rare Irrawaddy dolphin, with untold damage both upstream and downstream of the dams. Thousands of people will be displaced, both internally and as refugees outside Burma (see p2). The report claims that the China Power Investment Corporation is failing to follow even its own guidelines and standards.



Irrawaddy Freshwater Dolphin.

ABUSES INCREASE AFTER ELECTIONS

Human rights abuses by the Burmese military show no signs of diminishing in the post-election period, and in fact are on the increase, according to a new report from Human Rights Watch and the Karen Human



Civilian Forced Porters in Burma.

Rights Group, 'Dead Men Walking', which is available on www.hrw.org. The report details how the Burmese Army press-gangs prisoners from the jails in Burma to work as porters, where they are starved and beaten and often actually worked to death. They are deliberately used as human mine-sweepers for the Tatmadaw, and as human shields sent forward to draw enemy fire and protect the Burmese soldiers. Prisoners are taken because they cannot flee the Army, whereas civilians in conflict zones run away to escape forced portering.

Since January, up to 1,200 civilian convicts from 12 prisons and labour camps all over Burma have been taken to serve as porters for the army in conflict-ridden southern and northern Karen and eastern Pegu states. 'The horrendous conditions of portering are systematic, widespread, and constitute a war crime,' said Elaine Pearson, deputy Asia director of HRW. 'The Burmese government is unwilling to end abuses such as portering, and there is an urgent need for international investigations.'

In other conflict zones, the Shan Human Rights Foundation and the Kachin Women's Organization speak of increasing rapes and murders by the Tatmadaw.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Burma, Tomás Ojea Quintana, has repeatedly called for the UN to set up a Commission of Inquiry (Col) into Crimes Against Humanity in Burma.

GEMS AUCTION NETS HUGE PROFITS FOR BURMESE REGIME

Burma's state-sponsored gems auction in July reaped another \$1.5 billion in foreign exchange for the government. \$2.8 billion was earned at the main auction in March and more than \$1.44 billion at last year's mid-year auction. The gem sales provide a major source of foreign exchange for the Burmese government.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI'S REITH LECTURES FOR THE BBC

Video-recordings of both lectures were screened at the Radio Theatre, Broadcasting House. In the first, the Nobel laureate defined, referring repeatedly to the thinkers and poets who inspire her, how she understands the liberty she feels and seeks to give her followers: 'An inner sense of freedom [that] can reinforce a practical drive for the more fundamental freedoms in the form of human rights and the rule of law'. 'Our passion is liberty, [but] passion ... implies suffering by choice'. Calling her party's HQ 'a modest place with a ramshackle, rough-hewn air of a shelter', she added that 'more than once it has been described as the NLD "cowshed"', [but] we do not take offence. After all, didn't one of the most influential movements in the world begin in a cowshed?' They have been as excited as anyone by recent events in the Middle East, by reason of similarities with their own experiences, in 1988 and since. 'But there are dissimilarities too', the most important being that the peoples of Tunisia and Egypt enjoy far more 'the benefits of the communications revolution'. For this the Burmese envy them; 'but more than envy is a sense of solidarity and of renewed commitment to our cause'.

In her second lecture she recounted the history of her party, seeing the story of her people as a struggle for independence, first from the foreign British, and then from their native (and significantly more authoritarian) junta. She and her followers have embraced Gandhi's teachings on non-violent civil resistance, 'not on moral ... [but] only on practical political grounds'. Though never condemning the violence of 'freedom fighters', they accept the term 'democracy activists', yet aim 'not merely to engage in political activities but to restore the whole fabric of our society'. They have never felt alone; she had known of and praised their counterparts in South Africa and Eastern Europe, and agreed with Vaclav Havel that the 'job of a dissident movement was to seek the truth ... and that this endeavour should develop into a defence of the individual and his or her right to a free and truthful life'. Such 'dissidents' the NLD had been and remain.

Each lecture was followed by a longer session, in which she made (by telephone) informative responses—too full to detail here—to questions and comments from knowledgeable panels. For Suu Kyi this was a chance she enjoyed 'tremendously' to speak with the wider world. For all concerned about Burma's plight, it was tremendously revealing.

The lectures and discussions can be heard, and full transcripts downloaded, at

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/reithlectures>



Burma Action Ireland News:

BAI Annual General Meeting was held on Monday, 27 June at Loreto Hall in Dublin. The Agenda included a proposal to form BAI into a limited company, but forthcoming changes to the law made it wise to delay implementation until the new laws are in place.

We were privileged to hear first-hand about a very recent trip to Burma by one of the Executive Committee members, Eileen Seymour, who had visited Kachin state and seen the devastation and misery being inflicted on the villagers by the construction of the Myitsone

dam project. [see p3]. We were particularly excited to hear of her audience in Rangoon with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself, who is an inspiration to all those who actively work for a free, democratic Burma. We will include an article from Eileen about her trip in a later edition of the Newsletter.

Although sparsely attended, the AGM served its usual purpose of forwarding the aims of the group and working with partners in the Free Burma movement world-wide.

Bag-Pack Raises Much-Needed Funds for BAI

A two-day bag-packing event was organized by Committee member, Mary Costello, at her local supermarket and she and her team raised €1,528.11 for BAI. Brilliant work! Many thanks to Mary and all those volunteers who helped

and especially to the owners and staff at Morton's for facilitating the bag-packing. Thanks too to all Morton's customers for their generous support.

You must see...

There is a wonderful new documentary, filmed inside Burma, available on the web. Three skateboard enthusiasts from Brighton in England went to Burma to share their love of the sport with the local boys. The 'lingua franca' of skateboards brings them immediately into real contact with the young boys in Rangoon and Mandalay. Although they obviously could not

film overtly political material, they have managed to show how heavily the government domination of the people has impacted on the lives of the young. The joy when the Burmese boys are given a first-class skateboard by the film-makers expresses it all.

See it on: <http://vimeo.com/19780095>



Take Action to End War Crimes in Burma

The Burmese Army continues to commit horrific human rights abuses in the mountainous border areas of Burma, where ethnic minorities live. Since the election last year, crimes committed by the Burmese Army include the mass use of gang-rape of ethnic minority women and girls, continued recruitment of child soldiers, and deliberate targeting of civilians, including mortar bombing civilian villages without warning. Now there is an opportunity to get an official UN Inquiry into these crimes, an important step to exposing the truth and getting action to end these abuses.

In the coming weeks the EU will draft a resolution on Burma for the UN General Assembly. The EU has to decide whether or not to include establishing an inquiry in the resolution.

Please write to Minister Eamon Gilmore, asking him to ensure that the European Union includes a Commission of Inquiry in the Resolution. A draft letter is available at www.burmaactionireland.org

Free Burma's Video-Journalists

Please support the Free Burma VJs campaign for the release of 17 jailed video-journalists (VJs). The VJs were jailed for documenting the murdering of monks by Burmese troops, the regime's scorched earth tactics against ethnic minorities, and rampant state corruption during the controversial elections last year.

Go to www.burmaactionireland.org to sign a petition to the ASEAN Secretary General demanding that he pressure the Burmese regime to release the VJs. Deadline: 30 November 2011.

Send hope to Burma's jailed VJs, send them a postcard! Create your own postcards with a special message to the VJs and send your card to Géraldine May, P.O. Box 198, Mae Ping Post, Office, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 50301. Deadline is 1 October 2011. The postcards will be shown at an exhibition in Thailand and will then be sent to the VJs. More information is available at www.burmaactionireland.org.



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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.

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