

Burma Action Ireland

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Newsletter

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PO Box 6786, Dublin 1, Ireland • Tel: + 353 87 1261857 • Fax: + 353 1 855 9753 • Email: info@burmaactionireland.org • Web: www.burmaactionireland.org

HOPE FOR CHANGE IN BURMA?

Though they need to be viewed with great caution, there are some signs of change in Burma. Overall the most significant is the line being taken by the former top general Thein Sein. Since becoming President in March, he and likeminded colleagues appear to have adopted a careful reformist stance. On 19 August he had an hour-long private meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi. Few details have emerged, but Aung San Suu Kyi told reporters she was "happy and satisfied" with the meeting.

Since then, his most striking move has been on the issue of the massive Myitsone dam, one of seven that the Burmese military government agreed in May 2007 would be built on the Irawaddy by China's stateowned Power Development Corporation (PDC). But its construction has already displaced over 12,000 people, and would have threatened the livelihoods of millions. with catastrophic environmental effects, and the local Kachin were fiercely impeding its progress. In an open letter of 11 August, Suu Kyi called for its reassessment; a petition against it, signed by 1,600 Burmese, was delivered on I September; and a "Save the Irawaddy" campaign was gaining unprecedented momentum. It was nevertheless a surprise when on 30 September Thein Sein stated, in a note read out in parliament: "We must pay attention to the will of the people... Thus the Myitsone Dam project will be suspended during the term of our government". The announcement shocked and angered both the PDC and the government of China, which has long backed the military junta but also alienated many Burmese, including some generals, by its neo-colonization of their country.

Analogous recent moves have been limited easings of restrictions on the media and of access to foreign exchange (see page 3), and removals or reductions on taxes on exports like rice. But an issue seen in Burma and worldwide as a touchstone of genuine change is that of its over 2,000 political detainees. The recent amnesty of 6,300 prisoners included only 200 politicals, in spite of earlier hints from Sein Thein and Thura Shwe Mann (Speaker of Lower House) that it would be significant. The Thailand-based Association for the Assistance of Political Prisoners in Burma (AAPP) said that similar amnesties had taken place before and are used by the Burmese government "as tokens of change rather than substantial change." The popular comedian, Zarganar, was released, but commented that he could be rearrested at any time. The government still refuses to acknowledge the existence of political prisoners as such.

In short, Thein Sein has more power than



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi meeting Sein Thein.

was foreseen, and seems genuinely bent on change. But his moves are clearly intended in part to gain support at home ahead of impending bye-elections, to nudge the Western nations towards reducing sanctions, and above all to lend his nation a veneer of legitimacy within the South-East Asian community: ASEAN is due to determine soon whether Burma should hold its Chairmanship in 2014. His reforms, moreover, could be reversed. Hard-liners, led by his Vice-President Thing Aung Kying Oo, are waiting to pounce, and might provoke the military coup allowed for by the 2008 Constitution. At present the Armed Forces Commander, General Ming Aung Hlaing, is backing Thein Sein and Shwe Mann, but the army's support is by no means assured, especially if the retired dictator Than Shwe should decide to intervene.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI MORE ACTIVE THAN EVER

Aung San Suu Kyi is increasingly active, within Burma and beyond. Optimistic about the future, she believes Thein Sein can be trusted, is sincerely concerned with reform, and needs international support. In September she met Kurt Campbell, the new US Special Representative for Burma, who was making a six-day visit, and on two occasions the government's liaison officer, Labour Minister Aung Kyi.

Early in October she spoke with Andrew Heyn, until recently in Dublin but now Britain's Ambassador to Burma. Most specifically they discussed the issue of sanctions, on which, he reported, she was very clear: she needed to know the factsthe full background and detail of the US, Australian and EU approaches - before assessing her policy options, and then to discuss the question with her colleagues in the NLD.

She speaks to the world by video-link. After Hong Kong, the US and Britain, on 4 October she made such a virtual appearance at the University of Johannesburg (which was awarding her yet another honorary degree), expressing in particular her deep concern about the hostilities breaking out all over Burma between its military and ethnic minorities, but looking forward to a time when "we are a true union of hearts and minds".

ROHINGYA DEMONSTRATIONS WORLDWIDE

The plight of the Rohingya people of Burma was highlighted in many cities throughout the world this September by a series of demonstrations, aimed at drawing international attention to the denial of their fundamental human rights by the present Burmese administration. The demonstrations have been supported by speakers from the other oppressed ethnic minority groups of Burma, including the Kachin, Karen and Chin communities. [see back page for report on Irish Rohingya demonstration].

The Rohingya have been denied Burmese citizenship since the 1960s, when Ne Win removed their rights, and since then they have been deliberately targeted by the Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) in more than twenty campaigns which could justifiably be described as 'ethnic cleansing'. Burma's only Muslim minority, they have been subjected to marriage restrictions, denial of education, dispossession of their property and religious persecution by the Burmese authorities. The remaining population of 750,000 Rohingya in Burma are officially

stateless. Forced to flee their traditional lands, many thousands of Rohingya have become refugees in neighbouring countries. There are 28,000 registered refugees in Bangladesh alone, with a further estimated 200,000 unregistered, while Malaysia has an estimated 90,000 Rohingya. [Danish Government survey Feb. 2011]. There are many disturbing reports of maltreatment by the Bangladesh authorities of refugees in the camps there.

However, the Rohingya continue to be persecuted not only in their own land, but in surrounding states. As recently as 7 October this year, over a hundred were reported to have arrived, exhausted, at Penang Island in Malaysia where they were caught by the Malaysian authorities. Some who jumped into the water a quarter of a mile from the shore are believed to have escaped. Local police reports say that the refugees had not eaten or taken water for five days. "Some were too weak even to break the seals on the water bottles we gave them," said a local officer. They had been dumped into the open boat by a Burmese fishing vessel, although



they had paid money to escape from Burma. It is estimated that 90% of the refugees in Malaysia are from Burma.

In February, the Thai authorities abandoned an open, engineless boat with 90 Rohingya aboard, to drift at sea. A new documentary, called "My Rohingya," from the Thai journalist, Thananuch Sanguansak, gives insight into the reluctance of the authorities in Thailand to accept the Rohingya, many of whom have lived peacefully among the ordinary Thais for years. This film has been uploaded on YouTube by Thananuch and can be viewed on:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=DADMJ7QRtwo

ETHNIC FIGHTERS UNITE FOR PEACE

The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), an alliance of Burmese ethnic minority groups, was formed in February 2011, uniting 12 armed groups which are fighting against the Burmese Government. There are six armed groups in the UNFC core group: Karen National Union (KNU), New Mon State Party (NMSP), Chin National Front (CNF), Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and Shan Nationalities Progressive Party (SSPP). Six other armed groups are associate members.

In a statement issued on 8 September, the UNFC stated its desire to build a true union of Burma through the establishment of ethnic equality in place of the policy of Burmanization pursued for many years by the Tatmadaw. The statement notes that the new government has launched fresh military offensives against members of the UNFC at the same time as calling for dialogue. These offensives are in support of large-scale foreign developments which are bringing "extreme distress" for the

people and the environment. The UNFC has "serious doubt as to whether the overture for dialogue is out of good intentions." They have called on China to mediate and also appealed to "peace and justice loving people and the international forces to use their influence by political means" to resolve the conflicts.

Talks between the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the state government have failed to end the conflict in Mon state, following the breakdown of the 1995 ceasefire. A spokesman for the NMSP said that they are calling for a nationwide ceasefire and political talks between the Burmese government and the UNFC in Naypyidaw. It seems that the government is still seeking to 'divide and rule' the ethnic minorities by allowing only negotiations with separate groups.

At the start of October, Burma's Christian Council organized prayers for peace in Kachin state, and "for justice and equal rights for our people" as well as an end to the conflict between the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the Tatmadaw



Kachin Christians Pray for Peace.

(Burmese Army). "The people know that the Kachin fighters are fighting for our land and dignity, and they want to support them in some way," according to a Christian minister in the area. The Kachin community abroad also took part in the prayers and raised funds to support the KIO.

In July, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi called for an end to all the ethnic conflicts and an immediate cease-fire, and pledged her help for the peace process.

INSIDE BURMA

FEARS FOR KACHIN IDPS AS WINTER COMES

Kachin aid groups are running out of means to help more than 25,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) on the border between Burma and China. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) has been providing most of the food at 15 makeshift camps around the border, but as the conflict enters its fifth month, additional support is urgently needed. The conflict focuses on Kachin resistance to the Myitsone Dam and to the Burmese government plan to force them into a state-run border guard force. Most IDPs are living in temporary bamboo shelters with plastic sheet roofing. The crowded living conditions, poor sanitation and lack of clean water have led to illness seven children died, mainly of diarrhoea and malaria, in Laiza during August. At one site, 2,000 people are sharing 10 toilets.

Since fighting broke out in June, the UN and other international agencies have not had access to the area.



Kachin refugees.

MIXED SIGNALS IN BURMA

Reporters Without Borders criticised the Burmese authorities for increasing a journalist's prison sentence by an additional 10 years, saying this showed the new government was not sincere about reform. Sithu Zeya, who worked for the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), was sentenced to eight years in jail in 2010 after he was caught photographing the aftermath of a grenade attack in Rangoon. His sentence now totals 18 years. DVB says that about 25 journalists are in jail in Burma, 17 of whom worked for them.

At the same time, bans on foreign news websites have been lifted in Burma, including bans on Reuters, VOA and BBC, as

well as DVB itself. However, television remains strictly controlled by the government and foreign journalists are still mostly barred from reporting inside the country. Every song, book, cartoon and planned piece of art still requires approval by the official censors.

But perhaps the most puzzling news about censorship in Burma is the call by the chief of Burma's state censorship body for press freedom. Tint Swe, director of the Press Scrutiny and Registration Department, told Radio Free Asia that censorship should be abolished as part of the reforms by the new army-dominated civilian government.

WHERE NOW FOR THE BURMESE KYAT?

Six banks in Rangoon are opening foreign exchange counters from October, according to the *New Light of Myanmar*, in order to make life easier for tourists, help eliminate black market money changing and stabilise the kyat exchange rate. They are the first foreign exchange counters to be operated by private banks.

Burma's highly complex exchange rate system, with official, semi-official and unofficial rates, as well as Foreign Exchange Certificates, has meant that although the official government rate was fixed at around six kyat per dollar, almost everyone used black market money changers, who were offering about 800 kyat to the dollar. Holding dollars in cash without permission is illegal for ordinary Burmese.

The government has invited a team from the International Monetary Fund to visit Burma to offer advice on reforming the forex market and unifying its multiple rates. This extraordinary request from a regime which regards international institutions with suspicion, is seen as a sign of the currency market disarray in Burma.

The kyat's value has risen sharply against the dollar in recent years, dealing a blow to the authoritarian country's crumbling economy. Experts attribute the currency's new strength to the general weakness of the dollar, booming exports of gas and other resources, weak import demand, more foreign visitors and rising investment inflows.

INTERNATIONAL

JAPAN SEEKS TO BUY BURMESE RARE EARTHS

Since the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, Japan has gradually been strengthening economic ties with Burma. It has decided to restart infrastructure projects which it considers to be of direct benefit to the Burmese people, including the construction of hospitals.

At the same time, Japan's eagerness to exploit Burma's rare earth minerals reflects concerns among Japanese trade and government officials that their high-tech manufacturing sector will lose its competitive edge to China. China controls more than 90% of the global supply of rare earth elements essential for smart-phone technology, hybrid vehicles and other high-tech products.

ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION (AHRC) CONDEMNS TRADE IN CHILDREN

The AHRC is urging the Burmese government to prosecute child traffickers, following a case in which five children were trafficked in July this year and sold to the Burmese Army Battalion 605. Four have now been returned to their families, thanks to the intervention of the ILO staff in Rangoon. Although police have charged the trafficker, no criminal legal action has been taken against the soldiers or battalions involved in the trade in children. The absence of action against the soldiers in this case is consistent with other similar cases. Because in Burma military battalions are responsible for raising personnel, soldiers have incentives and pressures to work with traffickers to obtain new recruits.



Child Soldier in Burma (Photo: HRW).

DAW AUNG SAN SUU KYI WINS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PRIZE

This year's Chatham House Prize was won by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi for her contribution to international relations. "Her consistently measured and non-violent approach towards ending military rule in Burma has served as a powerful example to all those struggling to bring about democratic and accountable systems of governance in their countries," said Robin Niblett, Director of Chatham House.



MY VISIT TO BURMA

Earlier this year, I decided to visit Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi had been free for a few months; her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) had just issued a statement on tourism welcoming independent travellers; and the new 'civilian' administration was in place.

Burma has many tourist attractions, from the thousands of exquisitely decorated pagodas to beautiful scenery and stunning sunsets, but it is the people of Burma that are its real treasure. Despite the hardships they face every day, they were always warm and kind and friendly and very brave. The increasing prices of fuel and rice were common topics of conversation, It was rare for anyone to discuss the political situation openly but many were happy to share their views about such matters once in a safe environment. I was privileged to attend a discussion class run by a civil society group, where the topic was how to deal with differing views within a family situation. Hardly a dangerous activity one would have thought, but many of the teachers had been arrested at some point and were regularly followed by plain clothes intelligence personnel.

From Myitkyina in the Kachin State, I travelled to the source of the Irrawaddy River where China was constructing the Myitsone Dam to provide electricity for their own people (in early October, this project was suspended but not cancelled). Tens of thousands of Kachin people have been forcibly displaced, with a loss of livelihood and culture, not to mention the negative environmental impact. On the twohour journey, we passed people sitting outside



Aung San Suu Kyi.

their homes with all their possessions in bags waiting for the removal truck to take them away. There was no discussion, consultation nor compensation for the Kachin people.

Back in Rangoon towards the end of my visit, I had a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi at the NLD's headquarters, which resembles a ramshackle cowshed, albeit a very busy one. This petite, formidable lady is every bit as elegant and beautiful as one would expect and it was clear she is highly revered by her supporters. At that time, her main message was that despite the so-called elections and talk of reform, "nothing has changed". In her recent statements, she has said that there is potential for change and that we should keep an eye on events in Burma. Let us hope that this potential is materialised and real change happens, the people of Burma have suffered far too much and for too long. Eileen Seymour.

Urgent Action for U Gambira

Please support Amnesty International's call for Urgent Action for U Gambira, a Buddhist monk imprisoned in Burma for his role in the Saffron Revolution in 2007. He is seriously ill following torture in prison.

Please write:

- Calling for U Gambira to be admitted to hospital immediately for a full & independent medical examination and necessary treatment
- Calling for U Gambira to released immediately and unconditionally
- Urging the authorities to conduct a full and impartial investigation into reports that U Gambira was tortured, with the results made public and those responsible brought to justice

Please send appeals before 12 December 2011 to:

- Lt Gen Ko Ko, Ministry of Home Affairs, Office No. 10, Nay Pyi Taw, Burma
- U Win Mya, Chairman Myanmar National Human Rights Commission, Office No. 10, Nay Pyi Taw, Burma

Further info: www.burmaactionireland.org

ROHINGYA DEMONSTRATION IN DUBLIN

Supporting the World Rohingya Day demonstration, the Burmese Rohingya people who live in Carlow came up to Dublin to request the British and the Australian ambassadors to support their call for assistance. The Rohingya people in Burma and in Bangladesh have suffered extreme violence and harassment, being driven from one country to the other and even attacked in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. Their plight has largely been ignored by the world community.







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PO Box 6786, Dublin I, Ireland. Tel: + 353 87 1261857 Fax: + 353 | 855 9753 Email: info@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.

Hon. President: John Boorman Chairperson: Keith Donald

CONDOLENCES

Burma Action Ireland wishes to express condolences with the family of Lah Khaw, who has died in Castlebar, Co. Mayo, aged 84, one of the Karen refugees whom Ireland has been glad to welcome. His daughter, Way Day and her family are also living in Castlebar, but his two sons and another daughter remain on the Thailand-Burma border.