



Burma Action Ireland

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Newsletter

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WHERE NOW FOR BURMA?

The decision by the National League for Democracy (NLD) to contest the by-election on 1 April has opened up real new possibilities for the future of Burma. It was a courageous decision in many ways. Firstly, only 45 out of 600 seats were to be contested, so that the best result would give the NLD no more than a small fraction of the seats in the Burmese Parliament. Secondly, the risk of destabilizing an improving situation, brought about by their co-operation with the new President, U Thein Sein, must have been present in the minds of all the NLD members. Many commentators drew parallels with the previous election in 1990, when the Burmese military cracked down violently following the NLD's landslide victory. And the most obvious risk was just that the current administration, composed of ex-army personnel, would rig the votes in the same way as in November 2010.

The April vote returned NLD candidates to 43 out of the 45 seats available, another landslide victory. But this time, the painstaking ground-work performed by Aung San Suu Kyi and her advisers in establishing a dialogue with the government of Thein Sein kept the situation calm. The election of NLD members was joyfully welcomed by the voters, and Daw Suu expected to take her seat at the opening of

Parliament on 23 April, along with her colleagues. Furthermore, the splinter group, National Democratic Force (NDF), which won three seats in the earlier election, and the sole MP from the New National Democratic Party (NNDP), applied to rejoin the NLD. However the democratic new members have encountered a stumbling-block already.

In an initial test of wills, the NLD raised the wording of the Oath which must be taken by Members of Parliament. The NLD proposed that the wording should be altered from 'safeguard the constitution' to 'respect the constitution,' as this would mean that it could be changed from the present position whereby serving military personnel must hold 25% of the seats. Unfortunately, Thein Sein refused to change the Oath and the parliament opened without the NLD members. However, as a sign of goodwill they have now decided to attend and take the Oath.

Aung San Suu Kyi said, "We are fulfilling the wishes of the people, because the people want the NLD to enter parliament."

The Burmese public will have to wait to see if the transition to civilian rule is secure. The real test of the military regime's intentions will come at the general election in 2015.



Parliament in Naypyidaw.

“PERHAPS” IS PROGRESS

During his recent visit to Burma, the British Prime Minister, Mr Cameron, invited Daw Suu Kyi to make a trip to Britain in June, a chance for her to see family and friends from whom she has been separated since her return to Burma in 1988. The loss of her husband during her long incarceration in Rangoon must make this a bitter-sweet invitation. With characteristic graciousness, she said that two years ago she would have declined, knowing she would have been prevented from returning to Burma.

"Now I am able to say perhaps. That is great progress," she added.

Daw Suu Kyi has also said that she hopes to visit Norway, where she may finally be able to take her place with the other Nobel Peace Laureates.



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi with British PM David Cameron.

BURMA SANCTIONS SUSPENDED

Following her talks with British Prime Minister, David Cameron, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi confirmed that the NLD are now willing to consider the suspension of sanctions which were applied against the military regime by the European Union and the United States. On 23 April the EU suspended sanctions, except the arms embargo, for a year; when they will be due for reconsideration. The US has also begun this process, while making it clear that the ban on selling arms to Burma will continue in full force, as will the sanctions applied to named individuals of the old regime. Daw Suu said, "This suspension will have taken place because of the steps taken by the president and other reformers."

She strongly emphasised that the sanctions must be reapplied if the Burmese government fails to continue its reform of Burma's oppressive laws, and equally, if recent improvements are not made permanent.

The issue of Political Prisoners in Burma remains the most pressing concern about the

easing of sanctions. Many such prisoners who have been released have been re-arrested and oppressively questioned before being re-released, including U Gambira, the Buddhist monk prominent in the Saffron Revolution of 2007. He has also been forced to disrobe, along with many other dissident monks.

Although it is clear that the Burmese government hopes to reap great economic benefits from the suspension of sanctions, and many western economies are eager to do business with the newly opened country, the release of all political prisoners remaining in Burmese jails must be a sticking point. The US special envoy to Burma, Derek Mitchell, restated that the unconditional release of all political prisoners remains a condition for sanctions to be lifted.

This is the most critical time for supporters of democracy in Burma to echo Mitchell's stance; until all the political prisoners are unconditionally released, the hope for real and enduring change in Burma is futile.



REPORTS FROM KACHIN STATE

"While the West suspends sanctions, fighting and displacement continues in resource-rich Kachin State."

Three months after a new quasi-civilian government took office in Burma in 2011, a 17 year long ceasefire agreement between the government and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was broken. The breakdown of the ceasefire was the result of the government's attempt to protect a Chinese hydropower project which is being constructed in Kachin State.

In an attempt to find a solution to the conflict, there have already been five separate peace talks between delegations from the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the government during the last 10 months of fighting. However, no successful peace agreement has been reached, and ongoing fighting has resulted in about 75,000 Kachin refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). How does the new government respond to these Kachin IDPs and refugees? First, any local media that covers human rights violations in conflict areas in Kachin State is censored or punished by government authorities. Second, only 6% of Kachin IDPs have been able to receive UN humanitarian aid after four months of lobbying. Third, over

200,000 Kachin voters were disenfranchised when the government's election committee cancelled by-election voting for all three Kachin constituencies due to security conditions. These by-election voting cancellations took place despite the fact that these 3 constituencies were not in conflict zones.

While fighting with the KIA, the government has established fragile ceasefire agreements with 12 other ethnic armed groups. Nevertheless, the government's troops in those ethnic areas have not yet withdrawn. Furthermore, Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party, the National League for Democracy, won a landslide by-election victory for 7% of parliament's seats. Such a move will increase the government's legitimacy and bring rewards from the international community, including the lifting or suspension of sanctions.

However, for the Kachin people, these current reforms are just fueling a hybrid government economically and politically. Consequently, it seems that the Kachin people and the Kachin Independence Army will continue to be more and more oppressed.

[Thanks for this article by a Kachin visitor to Ireland.]

Humanitarian Crisis Looms in Kachin State

Refugees International, Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights have issued detailed reports accusing the Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) of using Kachin villagers as human mine sweepers and committing summary executions since the breakdown in June 2011 of the 17-year ceasefire. The Kachin refugees are effectively trapped between the fighters. Aid agencies are still prevented from entering the area. In a report released last October, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Tomàs Ojea Quintana, said that Burma's government had recently refused an offer from the UN to assist refugees trapped on the Kachin side of China's border with Burma. The lack of UN presence in the area is also deterring international aid agencies from entering the conflict zone.

MYITSONE VILLAGERS PERSECUTED BY BURMESE ARMY

In spite of the announcement by President Thein Sein that work on the Myitsone Dam in Kachin State is suspended, it is clear that Chinese workers remain at the site and, more worryingly, that villagers who have been forcibly removed from their homes have not only been prevented from returning but that their villages have been destroyed by the Burmese Army. There is also no sign that the Presidential cease-fire order is being obeyed by these troops. Many Kachin people are Christian, belonging either to the Baptist or the Catholic church. This Easter, a Baptist pastor was threatened with arrest by the police at Myitsone when he held a traditional service at a cross erected more than a hundred years ago at the confluence of the Mali Hka and N'Mai Hka rivers, which are tributaries of the Irrawaddy, Burma's most important river. Prayers during the service honour the rivers and urge protection for the sacred confluence.

Right: Baptist Easter Sunday at Myitsone Dam site near Myitkyina.





INSIDE BURMA

ILO GRANTED ACCESS TO CONFLICT ZONES

It is perhaps a sign of the divisions within the Burmese government that Naypyidaw officials in the Ministry of Defence have granted the International Labour Organization (ILO) access to the conflict zones in Burma's border states, home to the country's many ethnic minorities. Burma's membership of the ILO began at Independence in 1948 and has been continued ever since, making it perhaps the only international organization which has been able to maintain an influence, albeit very limited indeed during the years of the military dictatorship. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the defence ministry allowing the ILO access gives it a unique role in investigating human rights abuses carried out by the Tatmadaw. The MoU goes so far as to give action plans for the conflict zones, including the ending of forced labour on development projects and the use of civilians and prisoners as forced army porters. Although these appalling abuses have been reported by ethnic minority and human rights groups, they have been denied by the authorities. Their inclusion in the MoU is the first, tacit, acknowledgement of Army abuses by the government of President Thein Sein.

Thein Sein's government has committed itself to eliminating forced labour/conscription by 2015, when elections are due to be held. However, David Mathieson of Human Rights Watch in Burma considers that it will take more than an agreement to effect a real change of culture in the Tatmadaw:

"It requires a complete overhaul of the nature of the military and how it views the civilian population. It will also require constitutional reforms, to remove the immunity from civilian prosecution that the military enjoys, and which does nothing to address their entitlement to abusive behaviour. There also needs to be a complete overhaul of military training, with international humanitarian law becoming a cornerstone of military culture and the rules of engagement."

ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS WILLING TO PARLEY

The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), consisting of eleven armed ethnic groups, has responded to the offer of negotiations (December 2011) and is now ready to meet the Burmese government's chief negotiator, U Aung Min. So far, only five of the group members have signed cease-fire agreements with the government: Chin National Front (CNF), Karen National Union (KNU), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), New Mon State Party (NMSPP) and Shan State Progress Party (SSPP). The creation of the UNFC has facilitated a new phase in the long-overdue peace talks, as the old military junta's policy of divide and rule seems finally to be resisted by the disparate armed ethnic groups. The Tatmadaw has benefited by the long drawn-out civil war. It was in the army's interests to keep it dragging on as long as possible and there are still fears that vested interests will seek to scuttle the ongoing peace process.

There are signs of significant changes in attitude to the conflict by President Thein Sein's government. They no longer demand the ethnics should disarm before talks or transform themselves into Burmese border guards, nor that the talks must take place inside Burma. Now the chief condition seems to be that they must not secede from the Union of Burma, which seems to have been acceptable to several groups who have stated they do not wish to leave the Union. Furthermore, the government is now showing signs of willingness to continue political dialogue even after an



Aung San Suu Kyi with KNU Representative, Zipporah Sein.

initial ceasefire agreement has been made. The UNFC is calling for political dialogue to take place outside the Parliament. They seem to be taking a parallel position to that of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who met with a representative of the KNU early in April, following the KNU talks with the government in Naypyidaw.

BURMA'S REFUGEES: MAY THEY RETURN HOME YET?

Burmese refugees all over the world are wondering when it will be safe to return home. The living conditions for them in other countries are often appalling, and in some places like Malaysia, there is also the threat of deportation. In New Delhi about 700 Rohingya men, women and children have been camping in front of the offices of the UN Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the exclusive Vasant Vihar neighborhood. The protesters, who have been recognized by the UNHCR as asylum seekers, but not as refugees, say they want full recognition so they can receive financial support. Burmese refugees in Japan make similar complaints about the difficulties of establishing official status.

In an ironic twist, however, Thailand is now worrying about losing up to 100,000 Burmese refugees who have provided cheap labour to many Thai employers, especially in the construction industry. Most of the Burmese refugees in Thailand are Karen and Mon people, driven out of their lands by the Burmese military. In a recent interview, Professor Titinan Pohgsudhairak told the Phuket News that in order to prevent wage inflation and labour shortages in Thai industries, the state should accommodate them through education and healthcare at the minimum, and some residency rights eventually leading to citizenship. Following talks between the Thai and Burmese labour ministries, up to 20,000 Burmese could be flown to Bangkok for work. The move would have to be ratified at a bilateral meeting in Burma in May. Meanwhile, five new centres will soon open to enable Burmese migrant workers to formalize their status in Thailand.



Screening of *The Lady* in Newbridge

Directed by Luc Besson and starring Michelle Yeoh and David Thewlis, the film *The Lady*, based on the life of Aung San Suu Kyi, will be shown at the Riverbank Arts Centre in Newbridge on Friday, 11 May 2012 at 8pm.

Burma Action Ireland will be hosting a pre-screening introduction, starting at 8pm.

More information - Email: info@riverbank.ie; Website: www.riverbank.ie

Cyclists / Activists / Adventurists! Interested in the Mizen to Malin Cycle this Summer?

Starting at Mizen Head in West Cork on Sunday 8 July 2012, BAI member Maurice Hurley will lead a group of intrepid adventurers on the 800km M2M Cycle, passing through Ireland's beautiful West Coast before finishing in Donegal on Saturday 14 July.

There is no entry fee, you pay for your food and accommodation and contribute to van costs. The whole group stays together for relaxed morning cycles with average speeds of 25 km/hr; the group may split in the afternoon for those who like a challenge! Distances of about 110 km are covered each

day with routes away from the main roads where possible.

This is not a charity event. However, if you wish, you may raise sponsorship in aid of Burmese Refugees (funds will go directly to Burma border areas via Burma Action Ireland) or you may get sponsorship for your own favourite charity or do neither. This is a cycling holiday and, at the same time, Burma Action Ireland will organise some public awareness raising about Burma en route with press releases and photo opportunities.

For further information, contact Maurice Hurley on 087 056 4741 or Maurice@tetns.ie

What you can do

Adopt a Political Prisoner

Khun Kawrio, a member of the Kayan New Generation Youth, was arrested for campaigning against the military regime's constitutional referendum in May 2008. He was sentenced to 37 years imprisonment. Email or write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Eamon Gilmore, urging the Irish Government to take action to ensure the immediate release of all political prisoners. Letters should be sent to Dept. of Foreign Affairs, Iveagh House, 80 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2 or by email to eamon.gilmore@oireachtas.ie

Write a letter to Khun Kawrio to express your solidarity with him.

Khun Kawrio

c/o The Governor of Meiktila Prison, Meiktila Prison, Meiktila Town, Mandalay Division, Myanmar.

c/o The Governor of Loikaw Prison, Loikaw Prison, Loikaw Town, Kayah State, Myanmar. Please write to both of these addresses, as the authorities have not given any confirmed information on his whereabouts.

More info: www.burmaactionireland.org

Congratulations to our Karen friends on becoming Irish Citizens!



Karen Refugees from Mayo at the Citizenship Ceremony in Dublin on 1 April 2012.

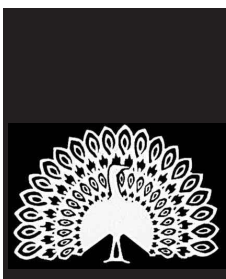
Invitation to a reading of the play *The Burmese for One*

Burma Action Ireland has commissioned a play that is specifically written for Transition Year school students. The play is fun, challenging and informative!

The playwright, Damian Gorman, has extensive experience of working with young people and has written the play, entitled, *The Burmese for One*, in such a way that young actors need little experience, minimal direction and no props.

A reading of the play will be held in Dublin on Saturday, 26 May 2012.

If you or your school or youth club are interested in performing the play, please email BAI at keith@keithdonald.com for further information and to reserve a place at the reading.



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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