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Burma Action Ireland

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

A THOUSAND WELCOMES

On her flying visit to Ireland on 18 June, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi truly received the "thousand welcomes" of tradition. She was welcomed at the airport by the Tanaiste, Eamon Gilmore on behalf of the Government; by President and Mrs Higgins at Arus an Uachtarain on behalf of the State; by Salil Shetty, secretary general of Amnesty International to receive the AI Prisoner of Conscience Award; and by Bono at the Bord Gais Energy Theatre for the Electric Burma concert in her honour. But it was the welcome she received from the waiting crowds and supporters, including many Burmese refugees now living in Ireland, which surely elicited the warmest response from Daw Suu: "I have been welcomed to Ireland as though I belong to you," she told the crowds outside the theatre. "You have stood by us in our times of trouble. These troubles are not yet all over and

I am confident that you will continue to stand with us."

Able at last to accept in person the Freedom of the City of Dublin conferred on her in 2000 (at the instigation of the late Martin Lacey, one of the founders of BAI), Daw Suu Kyi looked radiant as the crowd sang "Happy Birthday" to her and the Lord Mayor presented her with a special birthday cake. It is possible that, although she is received with such affectionate warmth in Burma, she may well have been surprised at the enthusiasm of the Irish welcome. But it underlines the odd affinity of our two nations. For many years, the colonial power referred to the Burmese as "the Irish of Asia", little realizing that the Irish independence struggle would fuel Daw Suu's father's ambition for Burmese independence.



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Geneva on the first leg of her European Visit

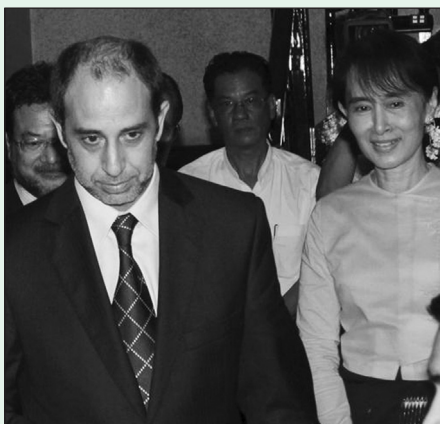
Quintana to investigate violence in Arakan

UN Human Rights Rapporteur, Tomas Olea Quintana, has arrived in Rakhine State to investigate the communal violence which has left at least 78 dead and tens of thousands homeless. His evaluation of the situation is likely to be seen as a yardstick for measuring the reforms undertaken by Burma's President Thein Sein. His visit comes after the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, called for a "prompt, independent" investigation into alleged human rights violations in Rakhine.

"We have been receiving a stream of reports from independent sources alleging discriminatory and arbitrary responses by security forces and even their instigation of, and involvement in, clashes," Pillay said. "Reports indicate that the initial swift response of the authorities to the communal violence may have turned into a crackdown targeting Muslims, in particular members of the Rohingya community."

Quintana visited two of the main sites of the June violence, the state capital Sittwe and Maungdaw township, where ferocious violence erupted last month between the ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Muslim Rohingya. Several Islamic countries, including Indonesia and Iran, have lodged protests against the treatment of the Rohingya, who were arbitrarily deprived of their Burmese citizenship rights in 1982. They are not allowed to travel without official permission, are banned from owning land and are required to sign a commitment to have not more than two children. The United Nations says there are about 800,000 Rohingya in Burma, and considers them to be among the most persecuted people in the world.

Ten workers for aid agencies including the UN are among 858 people currently detained by the



Tomas Olea Quintana with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Burmese authorities in connection with the unrest. The aid workers have been accused of taking part in the violence and "setting fire to villages," according to Burmese Border Affairs Minister Lt. Gen. Thein Htay. President Thein Sein told the United Nations that refugee camps or deportation was the "solution" for the Rohingya, according to his official website. Quintana will travel to Naypyidaw to meet President Thein Sein following his investigation in Arakan.

Indonesia says it will raise concerns about violence against the Rohingya at a summit meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Saudi Arabia in mid-August. Earlier in his visit, Quintana also discussed the issues of Kachin refugees and the stalled peace process with members of the 88 Generation Students group in Rangoon.

US appoints Ambassador to Burma

At the start of July, the newly appointed US Ambassador to Burma, Derek Mitchell, presented his credentials to Burmese President Thein Sein in Naypyidaw, thus re-establishing full diplomatic relations between the two countries. Shortly afterwards, the new Burmese Ambassador to the US, Than Swe, formerly Burma's permanent representative at the UN, presented his credentials to President Barack Obama in Washington. Since 2004, the Burmese have only retained a Charge d'Affairs in the US, and this new round of appointments represents a normalization of diplomatic relations.

However, Ambassador Mitchell stressed that the pseudo-civilian Burmese government's reforms are "not irreversible" and that the US remains deeply concerned about the continued detention of hundreds of political prisoners and conditions placed on those released, lack of rule of law, and the constitutional role of the military in the nation's affairs. Human rights abuses including military impunity continue, particularly in ethnic minority areas, he said. In his speech to the US Senate, he said he looks forward to many more opportunities for discussions with Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition National League of Democracy, about her country and about how the US can assist its progress towards democracy. The US, he added, has an "action-for-action" approach: "Each action we have taken in recent months has had as its purpose to benefit the Burmese people and strengthen reform and reformers within the system."

It is not entirely clear yet which actions by the Burmese government are referred to, as the quid pro quo for US lifting of sanctions and opening of new financial services.



HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES SOAR IN KACHIN STATE

The continued fighting between Kachin armed groups and the Burmese military has displaced an estimated 75,000 civilians, and there are increasing reports of grave human rights abuses.

There has been a huge rise in illegal detentions by the Burmese military, and it is feared that over 100 ethnic Kachin now face the possibility of torture by government troops. According to San Aung, a peace broker between the Burmese government and Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), local people continue to disappear and the rate of illegal detentions has doubled over the last month. He brought the matter to the National Human Rights Commission in Myitkyina on July 27, but the government body "only asked me about the peace process." When he tried to present the human rights issue, they were "not interested in it," he said. More than 1,500 Kachin people marched in Myitkyina on July 4 to demand the release of a local farmer who was arrested in June at a government-controlled camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) on suspicion of links with the KIO. More than 12,000 Kachin from 60 villages have been displaced to make way for the Myitsone Dam project. In addition it is estimated that up to 75,000 refugees have fled the conflict. Most of the refugees live in ramshackle camps along the Chinese border in rebel-controlled territory, while up to 10,000 have fled into China.

Around the Myitsone area, where the Kachin villages lie derelict, new gold mining operations have sprung up and the teak forests in the surrounding hills have been cut down. It is reported that, after the residents were forced out, a host of private mining and timber companies connected to powerful northern military commanders moved in. The vital ecosystem of the Irrawaddy has already

suffered from unregulated exploitation, and environmentalists believe that if the dam project resumes, its impact will extend far beyond the site, to hundreds of communities downstream which rely on the river to sustain the rice production in the Irrawaddy delta on which Burma depends.



Kachin IDP in a Chinese-constructed "model village" for forcibly relocated persons.



Kachin refugee in unofficial camp.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi speaks out for Ethnic Equality

In her maiden speech on 25 July to the Burmese Parliament, Pyithu Hluttaw, Aung San Suu Kyi urged them to enact laws to safeguard the rights of ethnic minorities, based "on equality, mutual respect and trust, in the Panglong spirit", a reference to the historic conference in 1947 when her father enshrined these rights in the first free Burmese constitution.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi quoted figures from the Asian Development Bank to highlight the extent of poverty in ethnic minority areas. "Additionally, the fire of internal conflict has failed to be extinguished," she said, adding that conflict in Shan and Kachin states and the state of emergency in Rakhine State only served to increase poverty.

"Safeguarding the rights of ethnic people is about more than the preservation of their language and culture," Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said.



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi speaks out for Ethnic Equality.

Violence in Arakan: New Report from Human Rights Watch

Burma's Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Burma's Rakhine State, is described by the UN as 'one of the most persecuted peoples in the world.' Their plight is finally receiving world attention, following a huge upsurge in ethnic violence against them. A new report from Human Rights Watch, "'The Government Could Have Stopped This': Sectarian Violence & Ensuing Abuses in Burma's Arakan State", claims that Burmese security forces failed to protect the Rakhine (Buddhists) and Rohingya (Muslims) from each other; and then unleashed a campaign of violence and mass roundups against the Rohingya. The report goes on to claim that recent events in Arakan State demonstrate that "state-sponsored persecution and discrimination persist." Burmese security forces are accused of committing killings, rape, and mass arrests against Rohingya Muslims after failing to protect both them and Arakan Buddhists in June 2012. The declaration of a state of emergency has meant that government restrictions on humanitarian access to the Rohingya community have left many of the over 100,000 displaced people in dire need of food, shelter, and medical care.

Bangladesh is the first country of asylum for most

Rohingya refugees. There are approximately 28,000 Rohingyas from Burma living as recognized refugees in camps in southern Bangladesh, and dependent on the UN and the international community for food, etc. An estimated 200,000 other Rohingyas live illegally outside the camps. The Bangladeshi authorities refuse to register the Rohingyas as refugees if they are outside the camps, leaving them without protection and without access to basic services. Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, now says that Bangladesh cannot afford to accommodate any more Rohingya Muslim refugees fleeing persecution in neighbouring Burma. The Bangladesh government has also put its law enforcing agencies, navy and border guards on alert to prevent Rohingyas from entering the country.

Meanwhile, the government of Burma has refused Bangladesh's call to take back the Rohingya refugees. Burmese President Thein Sein has even requested the UN to resettle all Burmese Rohingya into third countries as they are not recognized as Burmese citizens. This can only be described as ethnic cleansing.

Government Troops ignore Ceasefire in Shan State

There have been more than 23 attacks by Burmese troops since a ceasefire was agreed in January between the Burmese government and the Shan State Army. A further cease-fire negotiated on June 22 in Mandalay, has also failed to hold. "Aung Min (Naypyitaw's chief peace negotiator) told us in Kengtung that now that the military was on board he was confident there would be no more fighting," said a Shan spokesman, "but it seems the Army has its own agenda." Last year 30,000 people were displaced in the area due to ethnic conflict.

Lt-Gen Hso Ten of the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) was released from prison in October 2011, after serving seven of a 106-year sentence. Originally charged with "high treason," he was the only ethnic Shan leader to be released in the recent amnesties. He attributes his incarceration to the absence of the rule of law in Burma, which was one of the main points discussed in January's Taunggyi Conference between the SSA-N and government in the Shan State capital.

Over 2,000 political prisoners are still held in Burmese jails.



INSIDE BURMA

Censorship Continues for Burmese Press

Burma's Press Scrutiny and Registration Division has suspended two weekly journals, *The Voice Weekly* and *Envoy*, for an indefinite period for publishing speculation about cabinet reshuffles and other matters. The board did not give specific reasons for the suspensions, according to *The Voice* editor Kyaw Min Swe.

"Not only us, but they banned other publications too, which is contrary to democratic principles and norms. Our news is not causing protests and riot, not a violation of Official Secrets Act, and not infringing on the rights of anyone. We work only for the interest of our country, good governance and clean government," he said. Recently, a representative of the government filed a lawsuit against Snap Shot for publishing a photograph of a woman who was raped and murdered in Rakhine State on May 28. The photograph had been circulated widely on the Internet.

The censorship board warned the *Venus* and *Yangon Times* journals in July that they could have their publication licenses revoked after they reported information about the hospitalization of retired Vice Senior General Maung Aye.

The editor of *Envoy* said it seemed like the resurrection of the notorious Japanese censors during World War II.

Burma's Failing Education System

The UN has appointed ex-Prime Minister of the UK, Gordon Brown, as an unpaid Special Envoy for Education. Mr Brown recently held talks with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in London, and has promised to raise the issue of Burma's failing education system in the world body. Over 10% of Burmese children do not attend school.

One of the main obstacles to children's education in Burma is the depth of poverty experienced by many Burmese. Although primary school education is officially compulsory, many low-income families simply cannot meet even the basic costs of compulsory uniforms or educational materials and their children continue to slip through the cracks. Children from poverty-stricken backgrounds typically do not attend school at all, and many spend their days looking for plastic and other materials for recycling to supplement the family income.

Furthermore, many teachers and schools in the government system are so poorly paid that they solicit additional funds from parents to supplement their meagre salaries and resources. Government spending on education is estimated to be 1.2% of the national budget.



Government curriculum controls in Burmese schools mean up to 3 years in prison for teachers using "political" material.

Murder of NLD Member by USDP Thugs

Ye Win, a member of the National League for Democracy's campaign committee in Pwintbyu, died on 25 July after being attacked by a group of men armed with swords. His companion, Kyi Maung, managed to escape with minor injuries, and summoned help. Villagers, who arrived at the scene, found Ye Win dumped in a nearby pond with several lacerations across his head. However, Ye Win was able to identify the men who attacked him before he died. He was well known in the area for standing up to the authorities and highlighting the mistreatment of local residents.

Police in Magwe division's Pwintbyu township have arrested two men, including a member of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party, in connection with the murder. The police were unavailable for comment.

Book Review

Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads

Benedict Rogers 2012

ISBN 978184604346-8

This is a very timely book from Ben Rogers. His earlier book on Than Shwe remains the best account of the ex-general and dictator, who is most likely still pulling the strings behind the newly-elected Burmese government. Rogers' profound knowledge and understanding of the complexities of

Burma are again fully brought to bear in this new book, which I would highly recommend to everyone who has an interest in Burma.

The book's first chapter gives a brief and pithy account of the history of the current situation in Burma. If you are unacquainted with it or even if you know a considerable amount, this introduction is useful as a lucid and well-tuned rehearsal of events. It is very readable and manages to make the confused and often obscure forces at play in Burma into a clear narrative – no mean achievement. Later chapters take up particular aspects of the situation: the two uprisings (1988 & 2007); the violent military suppression of the Karen, Shan, Chin and Rohingya ethnic minorities; Cyclone Nargis and its aftermath; the appalling conditions for ordinary soldiers in the Burmese Army and especially for the enormous numbers of child soldiers who have been press-ganged into it; the even more terrifying conditions for the political prisoners in Burmese jails, who have yet an immense courage and fortitude in their principled stance, which ironically may give them more reason to survive than the oppressed soldiers who have been driven against them; the growth of the NLD; and the questionable transmogrification of the military into "civilian" representatives in the new parliament, elected last November.

In each of these chapters, the narrative is carried as much by Rogers' personal contacts and experiences as it is by his extensive knowledge of the facts of the situation. This makes it very easy for the reader to assimilate the whole picture, so that one finds oneself knowing a great deal more about Burma without feeling overwhelmed with numbers or the unnumbered horrors of the situation – both common failings in writing about Burma. A picture emerges of a country struggling to come to terms with its own ethnic diversity against the odds of a narrow, old-fashioned kind of nationalism.

The last part of the book, "*The Future?*", is brief and strikingly free of arrogance. Rogers prefers to cite wise Burmese, as in this quotation from Ludu Sein Win, who understands that the ethnic minorities "are fighting for their freedom. As a Burman, I hate the Burman mentality of seeing ourselves as the "elder brother" and the ethnic people as the "younger brother". Who gave the Burmans "elder brother" status? All the peoples of Burma should have equality, secured by federalism." (p227)



BAI EVENTS

1. **Monday 2 April:** Radio interview on East Coast Radio and with Near FM the following day about Burma & forthcoming visit by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.
2. **Wednesday 9 May:** information night "Burma Now – What is the Real Story?" organised by Mayo Intercultural Action in the Welcome Inn Hotel in Castlebar attended by about 40 people. **Speakers:** Kachin man Patrick La Ring & Castlebar-based Karen woman Phaw Shee Hta spoke about their experiences in Burma, the refugee camps and their life in Ireland. Eileen Seymour spoke about current situation in Burma. Thanks to Thérèse Ruane from Mayo Intercultural Action.
3. **Screening of The Lady:** on Friday 11 May at the Riverbanks Arts Centre in Newbridge. Seanán Ó Coistín and Kachin Patrick La Ring gave pre-screening talk.
4. **Tuesday 15 May:** "Where Now for Burma?" followed by Burma Action Ireland's AGM. Patrick La Ring, a

Burmese human rights activist with the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB, www.hreib.com) showed a short documentary and gave a talk. Karen Phaw Shee Hta from Castlebar and Rohingya Osman Johar also spoke.

5. **Saturday 26 May:** Reading of the play *The Burmese for One* arranged by Keith Donald at IMRO in Dublin
6. **Saturday 16 June:** Mary Montaut gave a talk to Amnesty members at the Human Rights Centre, NUI Galway and showed Burma VJ, attended by 35 people.
7. **Monday 18 June:** Daw Aung San Suu Kyi visited Dublin. BAI information tent outside the Bord Gais Energy Theatre. BAI also facilitated Burmese refugees to be present at the event.
8. **Sunday 8 to Saturday 14 July:** The Mizen to Malin (M2M) Freedom Cycle, led by Maurice Hurley, was completed by 14 riders. Starting at Mizen head, West Cork, they passed through Killarney, Tralee, Doolin, Carraroe, Castlebar, Westport, Sligo and Glenties, and finished their 800km journey in Donegal. Eileen Seymour gave local radio interviews along their route.



Burmese children waiting to see Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at Bord Gais Energy Theatre, Dublin.

What you can do

Political Prisoners:

Thant Zaw (aka Than Zaw) a member of NLD, is still detained after being sentenced to 30 years in 1989. Because of the brutal tortures he has endured, Thant Zaw's health has deteriorated in prison; he has received no medical attention for general bad health and deteriorating eyesight which were noted in 2006, by UN Special Rapporteur Manfred Nowak.

PLEASE write to Eamon Gilmore, Minister for Foreign Affairs, urging the Irish government to take action for the immediate release of ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS in Burma. Send your letter to Dept of Foreign Affairs, Iveagh House, 80 St Stephen's Green Dublin 2, or email to eamon.gilmore@oireachtas.ie.

ALSO write to express your solidarity to Thant Zaw, aka Than Zaw, c/o Governor of Thayet Prison, Magwe Division, Union of Myanmar.

Arakan Conflict:

Take Action: Write to your local TD, MEP and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, requesting him to bring pressure to bear on the Burmese authorities to rapidly resolve the situation in a peaceful and constructive manner, in particular to end the ongoing attacks and take steps to address the underlying causes. Letters to the Minister for Foreign Affairs should be sent to the above address.

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PO Box 6786, Dublin 1, Ireland.

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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

