



THE 'RESOURCE CURSE' IN BURMA

The phrase 'resource curse' refers to the paradox of rich natural resources resulting in a country's poor development, increasing gap between rich and poor, lower educational and health standards, and increased human rights abuses. The ethnic conflicts raging in so many states of the Union of Burma testify that this 'curse' is at work, fuelled by international rapacity and local corruption.

The conflict in Rakhine state, which has been widely reported internationally as religiously motivated violence between Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya groups, is located very close to the major development of a deep water port and gas pipeline for resource-hungry China. The first gas flowed through this pipeline on 28 July, part of a much bigger project to include gas-field development in the Bay of Bengal, 120 kilometre special economic zone, deep sea port and crude oil pipeline. The starting point for the pipeline is Kuaykphyu, a town on the west coast of Burma. If it proceeds as planned, it will become a hub of activity - rigs will tap the energy-rich Shwe gas field in the Bay of Bengal, Chinese tankers will dock at the port with millions of barrels of oil from Africa and the Middle East, new industries will spring up in the Special Economic Zone, railways will carry freight and passengers between Kuaykpyu and Kunming, and an expressway will run from Kuaykpyu to Ruili, a Chinese city near the border. But before this vision can be realised, many challenges must be faced, the most serious being that Kuaykphyu is in strife-ridden Rakhine state, the scene of frequent violent clashes between the Muslim and Buddhist populations. [see p2]

In Kachin state, conflict between the Kachin people and the Burmese Army surrounds the development of copper mining at Letpadaung (the Chinese-backed Monywa Copper Project), the building of hydroelectric dams on the rivers [Myitstone], and arbitrary confiscation of land by the military. The smaller mine at Kysisintaung has been accused of releasing toxic dust that is destroying farmland and blistering the skin of villagers nearby. The villagers claim the mines cause environmental, social and health problems in the area, and no compensation is paid to the displaced. In neighbouring Karen state, clashes have



Protesters march near the Letpadaung Copper Mine in Sarlingyi township, Sagaing.

recurred in violation of the year-old ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military. These ceasefire agreements are commonly believed to enable the Tatmadaw to regroup and resupply its posts, rather than represent any real disengagement.

Land confiscation by the military is increasingly common. In March, the Parliamentary Farmland Investigation Commission reported that the

military has forcibly seized about 250,000 acres of farmland in the country. However, its report was interrupted by Brigadier-General Kyaw Oo Lwin, an unelected military member of Parliament, who said: 'I have been very tolerant, listening... Repeatedly saying that the Army confiscated land is creating a divide between the Army and the people.'

Special Rapporteur Quintana denied access to Conflict Zone

UN Special Rapporteur, Tomás Ojea Quintana, visited Burma from 11-21 August to report on continuing human rights abuses, but the UN envoy has been denied permission to visit the Sino-Burmese border town of Laiza where the rebel Kachin Independence Army headquarters is based, with government officials citing security concerns. The government also restricted meetings in Shan and Chin states. Chin NGO representatives were not permitted an audience with Quintana although meetings had been arranged in advance. In Arakan state, where conflict between the Muslim Rohingya and the Buddhist Rakhine has flared since June, he was able to express his deep concern over the violence but was greeted by Buddhist

demonstrators who chanted and held banners accusing the UN envoy of backing the Muslim population. Later he said that he had gained personal insight into the terror felt by victims of communal violence when his convoy was attacked by a mob of over 200. His report is due in October, but it is unlikely that this visit will have provided him with much more information about the serious ethnic conflicts in the country.

Quintana continues to be concerned for political prisoners in Burma. The government denies that there are any political prisoners now, but other voices speak of up to 1000 or more in detention, some of whom have been rearrested after they were 'released'.



ETHNIC CONFERENCE REJECTS BURMA'S MILITARY 2008 CONSTITUTION

The Ethnic Conference organized by the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) on 29-31 July in Chiang Mai, Thailand, unanimously rejected the Burmese military-sponsored 2008 Constitution. A total of 122 delegates attended the conference, representing 11 UNFC-member organizations, 18 resistance organizations, the United Nationality Alliance, 4 political parties of ethnic nationalities, academics and active individuals. On 2 August, the UNFC issued a statement of the unanimously adopted positions and decisions (<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/stakeholders/unfc>) which include

- the formation of a Federal Union of national states having equality and self-determination, instead of the present Union of Burma/Myanmar;
- rejection of the current 2008 Constitution and replacement with a new constitution based on genuinely federal principles, to be drafted and

promoted by UNFC and United Nationalities Alliance (UNA)

- restatement of the programme agreed at the Ethnic National Conference in September 2012
- all resistance organizations to be represented as a bloc and not individually.

The conference said that a nationwide ceasefire agreement without adequate guarantees of political dialogue and monitoring mechanisms is unacceptable. There is a constant demand from the country's ethnic groups to enjoy equal political, social and economic rights.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has affirmed her readiness to run for president if the Constitution is amended to allow her to do so.

Several groups including the Shan, Kachin, Karen and Mon, have said they do not consider the Burmese President, Thein Sein, can be in control of the Army. However, a military analyst based on the China-Burma border said current clashes in Burma did not



Burmese military police harass Rohingya residents in Arakan.

indicate weakness on the part of Thein Sein, but the military was continuing to operate in accordance with plans created by Burma's former dictator, Sr-Gen Than Shwe.

ETHNIC CONFLICT ZONES

Rakhine State

In spite of the much-publicized abolition of the notorious Nasaka border security force by President Thein Sein on 12 July, new reports speak of continuing state violence against Rohingya people and the fomenting of anti-Muslim feeling in the Buddhist community. In the last year, it is estimated that 35,000 Rohingya fled Burma and Bangladesh by boat between June 2012 and May 2013, following extreme violence. The move by Thein Sein is seen by many commentators as an attempt to address international concerns over human rights abuses by the agency against the Muslim Rohingya minority. The Nasaka operated in Rohingya areas along the Bangladesh border with Burma, enforcing many discriminatory policies against the Rohingya Muslims, including travel restrictions, marriage restrictions, and the recently reactivated 'two child' limit. It has also faced many allegations of serious human rights abuses, imposition of forced labour and extortion. Following his recent visit to Rakhine, UN Special Rapporteur Quintana stressed that the abolition of Nasaka should not mean that credible allegations of widespread human rights violations by its members should be ignored, and called on the Burmese Government to hold the perpetrators to account.

However, hopes that the disbandment of the Nasaka border security forces would reduce religious conflict in the region have been dashed after as many as five people trapped in refugee camps died, one after allegedly being tortured by police, and about a dozen others suffered gunshot wounds following run-ins with officers. The latest killings have led to claims that many former Nasaka officers have moved to the police force, and there has been no real change of attitude or behaviour towards the Rohingya.

David Scott Mathieson of Human Rights Watch said: 'Disbanding the Nasaka is a hollow gesture if the government then permits their transfer to

paramilitary police forces that behave in the same brutal manner. The Rakhine State authorities and national government have to end the culture of abuse and impunity that the police force enjoy in these areas.'

Kachin State

Following the fracture of the Kachin Independence Organization's 17-year ceasefire with the central government in June 2011, Burmese authorities again began arresting Kachin people for having suspected ties with the KIO. More than 20 Kachin civilians, jailed for their alleged ties to the KIO, remain behind bars according to lawyers in Myitkyina, the state capital. Most of those jailed were charged with violating Article 17/1 of the Unlawful Associations Act.

Demonstrations at Letpadaung Copper Mine; A monastery near the controversial Letpadaung copper mine was raided 6 August by military police in search of activists fighting for local residents' land rights. 'They ransacked my monastery for nearly two hours,' said U Arloka, abbot of the San Myawaddy monastery. 'They asked my students the whereabouts of the activists. When they didn't get what they wanted, they slapped my boys in their faces and kicked them with boots.' The monk said the location of two still in detention remains unknown. Three locals are also being held for protesting against the project, and warrants have been issued for members of the People's Network active in the region. A curfew remains in effect in the area, which has seen recurring protests for over a year. The Women's League of Burma strongly condemns the violent handling and arrest of Naw Ohn Hla and nine other women, staging a peaceful protest against the Letpadaung copper mine in Monywa on August 13. Naw Ohn Hla, a leading activist from Rangoon, and over 50 local villagers were gathering in Monywa to call for the suspension of the controversial Chinese-backed



Shan State. (Photo: Burma Partnership Poster).

copper mine, and to amend the 2008 Burmese Constitution. The police moved in to arrest her and other protest leaders, pulling them into the back of police trucks. Naw Ohn Hla was seized so violently that her clothing was partially pulled off. The Women's League of Burma strongly condemns the violent handling and arrest of Naw Ohn Hla and nine other women who were protesting peacefully.

'This violent and degrading treatment of peaceful women activists is a disgrace. It lays bare the hypocrisy of the government's democratic reform process,' said Daw Tin Tin Nyo, General Secretary of the Women's League of Burma.

Shan States

Clashes have resumed between government troops and allied ethnic armed groups in northern Shan State, almost a month after the gunfire last stopped. The fighting has reportedly forced Kachin and Palaung residents to flee from their homes and hide in the jungle. Government troops are deployed most heavily in Nansang, Mongtong, Namkhan, Kutkai and Namatu townships. Normally, government troops camp in villages where the gas pipelines pass through from Burma's Rakhine State to China's Yunnan Province. The renewed clashes occurred amid pledges by the government soon to hold a nationwide ceasefire conference with ethnic minority groups in the capital, Naypyidaw.



HEALTH REMAINS A LOW PRIORITY

Burma is ranked last out of 190 for 'overall health system performance' by the World Health Organization (WHO). Burma spends roughly 2% of its GDP on healthcare; impoverished Laos spends 4.5%, Cambodia 5.6%. Because of the pitiful amount of money the government has historically spent on healthcare, Burma continues to struggle with basic problems related to communicable diseases. Malaria is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality, with many of these deaths occurring from a drug-resistant form of the disease common along the border with Thailand. TB rates in Burma are estimated to be three times the global rate, the majority of cases drug-resistant. The government claims it is willing to spend more on health, but

stakeholders within the government will be resistant, not only to economic and political reforms, but also to attempts to redirect tax revenues away from the military and towards public goods like healthcare. In 2011, the country's Minister of Health, Yaw Myint, rejected a proposal to reform the country's paltry government healthcare, and stated publicly that increases in spending on medical services for the poor were not necessary.

A pressing concern to those familiar with the corruption and dysfunction that characterizes Burma's government is how much of the increased spending on healthcare will actually benefit the people.

Aside from concerns over graft, Burma lacks any

substantial administrative public health capacity. Questions over how new money will be spent, and who makes decisions about priorities, remain unanswered. The country needs to increase the number of doctors who graduate each year from 1,200 to 1,500, while doctors already in practice are badly under-remunerated. Trauma care capabilities are inadequate, especially in rural areas. There are only 61 oncologists in the entire country, and only 3 radiation machines in Rangoon while cardiovascular diagnostic capabilities hardly exist. Against the backdrop of the many different and pressing needs, a set of clear priorities on how to spend limited government resources will be necessary.

CRONYISM AND THE BLACK ECONOMY IN BURMA

It must still be the case that the informal economy in Burma is at least as big as the formal one, according to Sean Turnell of Burma Economic Watch. Recent changes in Burma will have produced two opposing effects in the black economy: some activity will move into the formal sector; for example foreign exchange, but at the same time much cross-border business activity, faced with obstacles and bureaucracy, will spill over into a more 'enabling' informal sector.

Well-known cronies of the old military regime are evidently thriving in Thein Sein's Brave New Burma as well. Pioneer Aerodrome Services, a subsidiary of Asia World, has just been awarded a government contract to modernize Rangoon International Airport. Asia World is controlled by Steven Law, also known as Tun Myint Naing. He was listed by the US government for links with Burma's illegal drugs trade. It is still illegal for US companies to have business dealings with Law, but he has openly formed a consortium with China Harbour Engineering Company and Malaysia Airport Consultant Services to work on Rangoon International Airport. The Burmese Department of Civil Aviation does not have to disclose the reasons for its choice of contractor.

In May, a company owned by military regime crony and US blacklisted Burmese businessman, Tay Za, was given a contract to control all import and export cargo handling services at Rangoon International Airport. Mingaladon Cargo Services, a subsidiary of the Htoo Group of Companies, was awarded the concession by the Department of Civil Aviation, which said there had been bids from three companies.

The Htoo Group's business is growing under Burma's economic reforms and now includes mining, farming, hotels, an airline and banking.

The re-opening of US and European markets, after years of isolation through sanctions, is intended not only to encourage formal, legitimate trade but also provide help in anchoring Burma's recent reforms. 'Trade is fundamental to supporting political stability and the EU's trade preferences mean we will give this reform-minded country priority access to the world's largest market,' European Union Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht said in July. 'The EU is also going to help [Burma] boost the capacity of both public and private firms to make use of these new opportunities.'

PRESS FREEDOM IN BURMA?

In March this year, three media groups – Myanmar Journalists' Association (MJA), Myanmar Journalists' Network (MJN) and Myanmar Journalists' Union (MJU) – protested against the draft Printing and Publishing Law, drawn up by the Ministry of Information (MOI) and submitted to the Lower House of Parliament on 27 February, 2013. They protested because MOI did not consult with media stakeholders about the draft bill, which strengthens government control over print media freedom.

Many journalists say that it is no different from the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law, enacted by the late Gen. Ne Win, and that the bill just changes the title of the censor to 'registration officer', but his authority is the same as before. The draft law assigns a new registration administrator to issue publishing licences and scrutinize the press for violations of regulations. The registration officer has the power to stop a publication or can refuse it renewal of its licence for another year. A more complicated question is that the MOI's draft bill included radio and television plus internet-based media, as well as print media, so observers think the MOI has trespassed beyond the boundary of print media.

The MOI's draft law provides the regime's information ministry with wide-ranging powers to revoke publishing licences, control press competence and charge journalists with violating the state's security measures.

The most debatable part of the draft bill is in chapter 3. In brief, chapter 3 requires the press not to print or publish issues concerning incitements to racial and religious hatred; agitations to damage law and order; fuelling riots; immoral sexual related matters; supporting violence and crimes, gambling, drugs and methamphetamine connected unlawful activities; writings against the current constitution and existing laws. Many journalists consider that these 5 restrictions show no clear-cut definition but are more likely to be repressive rubber-band prescriptions. Most journalists believe the dispute over media freedom between the MOI and the Press Council discloses the reality of President Thein Sein's reform policy.

International media groups have repeatedly urged the Burmese authorities to dump their unethical laws governing freedom of expression. The Burmese government still needs to revoke the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law, the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act, article 505-B of the criminal code, the 1996 Television and Video Act, the 1996 Computer Science Development Act, the 1923 Official Secrets Act and the 1933 Burma Wireless Telegraphy Act, all of which still restrict press freedom in Burma.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

A big thank-you to all of you who have written to political prisoners or on their behalf to the Irish Government. On 23 July, 73 political prisoners were released, one of whom was Kachin farmer and political prisoner Brang Shawng. Thanks too for highlighting the Kachin conflict and the plight of the Rohingya with the Irish Government and for sharing the responses you received with BAI.

Khin Mi Mi Khaing and Myint Myint Aye are leaders of two independent women's networks in Burma, promoting equality, peace, and development in the country. In June, they visited Pae Ma Khan village in Bago Division to show their support to farmers who ploughed land that had been confiscated. The Burma Army confiscated their land almost two decades ago. The day after the demonstration, they were arrested and charged under Section 6 for violating the Unlawful Association Act and failing to register their social networks with the Burmese government. They were denied bail and sent to Paungde Prison. Family members are worried about their health because Khin Mi Mi Khaing has suffered from hypertension and Myint Myint Aye suffered from mild stroke last year. Their trials continue at Nattalin Court.

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. Letters can be sent to Dept. of Foreign Affairs, Iveagh House, 80 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, or by email to eamon.gilmore@oireachtas.ie

NOTICE OF BAI ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Date: Thurs. 3 Oct. 2013 at 6.30pm.

Venue: Loreto Hall,

77 St. Stephens Green, Dublin 2.

ALL ARE WELCOME.

BAI EVENTS

On 2 May, Burma Action Ireland was delighted to host the Irish launch of *Brave New Burma*, a wonderful book by the Irish-born Bangkok-based photojournalist and author, Nic Dunlop. The book beautifully captures the struggles of daily life under the dictatorship in Burma, from the chained labourers under armed guard, to the frontlines of war, to Aung San Suu Kyi. Having spent 20 years photographing Burma under military rule, Dunlop gave an engaging talk about trying to capture in pictures what a military dictatorship looked like. 44 people attended the event.

During June, Burma Action Ireland organised three exciting and informative events at the Irish Aid Volunteer Centre on O'Connell St. in Dublin. On 27 June we were privileged to welcome Khairul Amin & Haikal Mansor who both spoke about the horrific sufferings of the Rohingya people in Burma. Khairul was born in Burma but is now living in Norway. He is the founding member and chair of The European Rohingya Council. Haikal is a member of the Rohingya community in Ireland and is based in Galway where he is studying medicine. Haikal spoke about the historical background of the Rohingya community and Khairul spoke about the current crisis. A short video of the violence against the Rohingya was also shown. We were delighted also that members of the Rohingya community in Carlow were in attendance and greatly assisted in organising the event. 18 people in total attended. While the situation is deeply depressing, the importance of doing all we can to create awareness of the situation was highlighted. A representative of TD Maureen O'Sullivan was in attendance and she subsequently raised the issue in the Dáil.

On 6 June we screened the documentary, *Burma Soldier*. This documentary tells the story of Myo Myint who made the transformation from being a soldier in Burma's junta to a pro-democracy activist. Co-directed by photojournalist Nic Dunlop, the documentary offers an exclusive and rare perspective, from inside the heart and mind of a former Burmese soldier who lays bare an understanding of a brutal regime and the political and psychological power of the junta over the country. We were delighted to welcome Julie Le Brocq, the documentary's producer, who introduced the documentary. 10 people attended.

Finally, a range of moving and thought provoking photographs taken in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border was on display in the Irish Aid centre from 6 to 26 June. These camps are home to Burmese refugees who fled persecution and oppression in Burma and are now living in precarious conditions. Some have been living in the camps since the popular uprisings against the regime in 1988. The photographer, Philip Daly, has portrayed their lives in the camp with sensitivity and respect.



Members of BAI celebrate award of Irish Citizenship with Rohingya in Carlow.

Burma Action Ireland

PO Box 6786, Dublin 1, Ireland.

Tel: + 353 87 1261857

Fax: + 353 1 855 9753

Email: info@burmaactionireland.org

Web: www.burmaactionireland.org

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

