

# Burma Issues

Providing analysis on the situation in Burma and a platform for the grassroots people to share their voices



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Editor: Naw Chamu

235/26 Asoke Dindaeng Road, Makkasan, Rajtaevee (Rachathewi) Bangkok 10400, Thailand

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# MIGRANT WORKERS ON THE BORDER

## THE CURRENT SITUATION OF BURMESE MIGRANT WORKERS IN MAE SOT

LIZ SLIPPER

Mae Sot is the busiest border town between Burma and Thailand, and home to an estimated 200,000 Burmese migrant workers.

Migrants in Mae Sot find work in areas such as construction, agriculture, and the service sector but by far their most common form of employment is in one of the 300+ factories, each of which provides work for between 100 – 1000 Burmese staff. About another 200 unregistered 'home factories' employs between 5 and 20 workers each.

Life as a factory worker is far from ideal. The great concrete blocks are often topped with barbed wire, and the movement of the workers is tightly controlled. They usually sleep in one poorly ventilated concrete room, and have inadequate washing and toilet facilities. There is often not enough water so workers are dehydrated and no clean water, so that workers are frequently ill. Most factories do not offer healthcare, and workers are reluctant to go to the free Mae Tao Clinic because they miss out on a day of work to do so. In principle registered migrant workers are accorded the same rights as Thai workers except for union rights. However knowledge regarding these rights is not widespread, and workers have little faith in any institution acting to help them, and fear retribution (particularly job loss, extortion or deportation) if they take any steps to complain about their situation.

During the 'high season' factory workers often work 14 hour days for less than the minimum wage, and with little or no pay for overtime. When orders decrease, as they have done recently as a result of the global economic downturn, workers face losing their jobs or severe cutbacks in their hours. One migrant worker said that they earned 70 – 80 baht per day, after their accommodation and work permit dues were deducted. This is not a living wage, and losing out on hours pulls workers even deeper into poverty.

The knitted-goods export industry has been hardest hit by the global recession. Knitted garments are primarily destined for the US and European markets, which have been particularly affected by the economic crisis. With people consuming less in these countries, there are fewer orders for Mae Sot knitting factories. The average monthly income for a worker in such factories hovers close to 2,500 baht, with only regular shifts available. However the Mi-

grant Assistance Program (MAP)'s report, 'Critical Times - Migrants and the Economy in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot' states that: "at this time last year, which is a relatively high season, a knitting factory employee might have made 6,000 baht a month".

Entire families in Burma depend on their relatives in Mae Sot sending money home. As the export markets dry up and the value of the Thai baht depreciates against the Burmese kyat, migrants are able to remit less and less money to their families. Jackie Pollock, director of MAP, has been quoted as saying "It is just starting to hit them. The families in Myanmar are living off what was saved from last year's remittances."

One female migrant worker interviewed for the report said, "I can't support my parents because I'm not in a good job situation. My brother and sister are also not okay - they also can't support with any money."

In order to work in Thailand legally, migrant workers are supposed to hold a valid migrant work permit. Accessing these permits requires migrants to go through a lengthy and costly process, compounded by the fact that the language barrier means they usually need to make use of a middle-man. However, the Thai government has periodically allowed 'amnesties', in which current unregistered workers can apply for a work permit without repercussions. The last of these was in July 2009, after which a statement was released stating that all workers who were not registered and did not have nationality verification would be deported after February 28<sup>th</sup> 2010.

Nationality verification is a process decided upon in a 2004 Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Thai government and Burmese junta, and which issues all migrant workers with a temporary passport allowing them residence and movement in Thailand.

The nationality verification process stalled until 2008, because the Burmese government wanted verification to occur in Burma, whereas the Thai government wanted processing centres to be set up in Thailand. The three busiest border crossing towns on the Burmese side of the border, Kawthaung, Myawaddy and Tachileik were designated as nationality verification centres, and migrants were told that they had until 28<sup>th</sup> February 2010 to attend these centres and



complete the process to avoid facing deportation. With only 200,000 migrants registered for verification by 24<sup>th</sup> February, the Thai government extended this deadline until March 2<sup>nd</sup>. By this date 850,000 workers from Laos, Cambodia and Burma had visited local employment offices and signed agreements to complete the procedure by March 31<sup>st</sup>, whereupon they will be given 2 year work permits.

Nationality verification is a relatively expensive 13-step process, which costs around 3800 Baht (116USD). Since many migrant workers do not speak or write Thai, they frequently employ the services of brokers to guide them through the procedure, which increases the cost of the passport dramatically. There have also been reports of migrants paying for their passports, only for the 'broker' to disappear with their money.

Many human rights groups have said that migrant workers are often nervous of returning to Burma, because they fear harassment from officials, and repercussions on their families after they have provided the personal information required by the process, which includes an exact home address in Burma. There have been rumours of the families of ethnic minority individuals (such as Shan, Karen or Mon) who have undergone nationality verification being 'taxed' by the junta on the grounds that they have a family member working outside of Burma.

Similarly, police in areas of large concentrations of migrants from Burma often arrest registered and

**"The main problem is that people are suspicious of the Burmese government officials inside Burma. And that is why many people will not go for that process."**

**Myint Wai, deputy director of the Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma.**

unregistered workers indiscriminately, and both have to pay bribes before they are released, leading many migrant workers to decide that gaining nationality verification will have very little real impact upon their lives. According to a recent Human Rights Watch report, migrants can face police abuse including extortion, arbitrary detention, torture, sexual abuse and even killing. Police seem to act with impunity, especially since they are part of the Thai justice system which the migrant would have to use to file complaints. There is little help on offer for Burmese migrants seeking help; they are wary of contacting their embassy even if they are in Thailand legally, and NGOs who can offer assistance are frequently very busy and underfunded.

Consequently although the rights guaranteed in the temporary passport is supposed to allow for unrestricted travel in the kingdom of Thailand, legal sta-

tus within the eyes of Thai police and immigration authorities, and guaranteed treatment at health care facilities in Thailand, which are necessarily important improvements in the life of a migrant worker, the difference will be minimal unless the complicit abuse of migrant workers by employers and the police ends. This will require intervention from the Thai government, who need to act to ensure that the treatment of migrants complies with international standards, in terms of their employment and living conditions and their treatment by the authorities.

Life as a migrant worker in Thailand is hard, and the returns on labour are getting worse. Although the nationality verification program should help to make life easier and more enjoyable for Burmese migrants, in reality it might not offer much change, and could be a burden on the families who remain in Burma. Yet the

situation facing the 500,000 registered migrant workers who have not applied for nationality verification and 1 million unregistered Burmese migrants who remain in Thailand is far worse. They are waiting to see if a mass deportation will begin, as many organizations working on the border predict. If it does, those workers face being expelled into a country of conflict, extreme poverty and endemic human rights abuses.

**“We will have to arrest and deport those alien workers who have not kept in line with prescribed procedures”**

**Employment Department’s Deputy Director-General Supat Gukun told newspaper The Nation**

## MIGRANT WORKER PROFILE: PAPU



**P**apu is 16, and came to Thailand 9 months ago after a broker approached her mother about working in Thailand. She came with 2 of her friends but has no family here. Tragically one of her friends was hit by a car and killed last year.

She works in a sock factory, along with 300 other migrant workers, the majority of which are women.

Papu lives above the factory floor with the majority of the rest of the workers, in a place she describes as “dirty and dark”. She is not allowed to go outside often to visit the shops or to see friends.

Papu starts work at 8am and usually finishes at 11pm. She works 6 or 7 days a week for 1,200 baht per month, and has to give some of this to the broker who brought her into Thailand from Burma. She says she thinks that people who show loyalty to the factory and have been there for longer earn more money.

Papu has only been able to send 30,000 kyat home since starting work. She says that she thinks there is less pay and fewer jobs around since she started work.

She is an unregistered migrant worker, as she says that her employer doesn’t register the workers until they have been there for at least a year. She doesn’t think that many of the workers in her factory are registered: she estimates that about 20 are.

Papu says that she would like to be registered, because she is afraid of being stopped and arrested without an ID card. For this reason, she rarely ventures outside of the factory, staying inside most of the time. She would like to become a registered refugee in Mae La Refugee Camp and be resettled to the U.S.

# BURMA SANCTIONS: MISCALCULATIONS & UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Ever since the 1988 military coup and the repression of the 8888 pro-democracy demonstrations, the United States has been following a narrowly-focused policy of sanctions toward Burma to force the military regime of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to release political prisoners, halt human rights abuses, and adopt democratic principles. This policy was ill-conceived in the U.S. Congress under pressure from various well-intentioned, yet idealistic, Burmese pro-democracy activists.

The sanctions were predicated upon assumptions which were not given objective consideration and have proved to be invalid. Despite these miscalculations, the U.S. failed to make appropriate policy adjustments in light of actual realities. After over twenty years of increasingly progressive sanctions, not only have the policy objectives not been realized, but serious unintended consequences have arisen as a direct result of these sanctions.

The military regime is stronger than it has ever been since the first military coup in 1962 and now reflects great confidence in their abilities to address the important issues that threaten it. Aung San Sui Kyi is no longer a threat to the SPDC or seriously relevant in its considerations.

China has made Burma an economic colony and through its imperialist ambitions toward Burma, has secured access to the Indian Ocean for strategic economic, political, and military purposes. The natural resources of the country have been plundered by China, Thailand, and other members of ASEAN, providing a growing stream of funding for the purchase of sophisticated weaponry and the enrichment of the generals, their families, and business cronies.

The sixty year insurgencies by the ethnic groups to protect their human rights and secure equality with the dominant Burman establishment have come to an end with the virtual demise of the Karen democracy movement in eastern Burma and the SPDC's "one country-one army" strategy. This political-military strategy may ironically succeed in finally uniting the country for the first time since independence – a feat that has eluded previous Burmese regimes, and the efforts of the United States and Bur-

mese pro-democracy forces. These are just some of the key consequences of a Burma policy formulated by the U.S. upon emotions, miscalculations, and inflexibility.

The U.S. restrictive policies toward Burma began just after the pro-democracy protests during the summer of 1988. These policies were progressively strengthened as the military regime failed to transfer power after they lost the open election in 1990 to the National League for Democracy, placed Daw Aung San Sui Kyi under house arrest, imprisoned political opponents, and engaged in human rights violations.

The following is a chronology of the key U.S. restrictive actions to force the Burmese regime to respect human rights and adopt democratic principles:

## KEY U.S. SANCTIONS AND OTHER PUNITIVE ACTIONS AGAINST BURMA

*1988: Cutoff of all military and economic assistance, suspension of all humanitarian aid, and blocking of all assistance from the IMF, World Bank, & Asian Development Bank.*

*1989: Withdrawal of preferential duty-free entry of products from Burma into the U.S., halting of Export-Import Bank preferential financing for U.S. exports to Burma and OPIC financial services for investments in Burma, and refusal to accept the renaming of the country as "Myanmar".*

*1991: Termination of the U.S. - Burma bilateral textile agreement.*

*1992: Downgrading of diplomatic relations with Burma by refusing to nominate a new ambassador to Burma, placing the U.S. embassy in Rangoon under a charge d' affaires.*

*1996: Denial of visas for travel to the U.S. by senior Burmese military and government officials and their families.*

*1997: Prohibition on all new investments in Burma by U.S. persons and companies.*

*2003: Ban on all imports of products of,*

*and exports of financial services to, Burma; further ban on travel to the U.S. by designated former and present leaders of the Burmese government and military, or the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), and their families; and, the freeze of all assets held in the U.S. by the Burmese government, and senior officials of the Burmese government and military, and the USDA.*

*2007: Ban on travel to the U.S. by, and freeze of all assets of, other designated Burmese military and government officials and their families as well as other designated persons who provide material or financial support to the regime, or are responsible for public corruption and human rights abuses.*

*2008: Freeze on all assets held in the U.S. by an expanded list of individuals and entities associated with the regime, and a ban on the importation into the U.S. of rubies and jadeite mined in Burma and jewelry containing rubies and jadeite made in Burma.*

*Despite these measures by the U.S. over the past twenty years, the military regime has not transferred power to a civilian government, continues to arrest and imprison political opponents, holds Daw Aung San Sui Kyi under house arrest, and commits human rights abuses. These sanctions advocated by Daw Aung San Sui Kyi, Burmese opposition groups and their pro-democracy supporters, and U.S. politicians have so far failed to accomplish their objectives.*

**The key miscalculations on the part of these sanction advocates were the:**

- *Very strong determination on the part of the Burmese military regime, tempered by decades of semi-isolation and self-reliance, to resist sanctions;*
- *Lack of broad support by the national and business interests of Japan and the Western allies of the U.S. toward sanctions;*
- *Opposition by China and Russia in the UN Security Council for censuring or placing sanctions on Burma;*
- *Strength of the economic ties between Burma and its neighbors*
- *Early failure to recognize the strategic importance of Burma to China; and,*
- *Non-interference policies of China and ASEAN toward Burma.*

Also compounding this situation were the inflexibility of Daw Aung San Sui Kyi at crucial times, her gradual loss of power to affect the regime, and the policy blindness of moral ends

over realism by the U.S. government.

For most of its years since independence, Burma has been a very insular country following its own "road to socialism". It was not aligned with either the East or West during the Cold War. Thus Burma has learned how to take care of itself and as one Burmese government official said in 1998, "I would like to tell my American friends that sanctions will hurt you more than us. After all, we virtually imposed sanctions upon ourselves for 30 years, and we are still here."



The sanctions against Burma by the U.S. have been undermined by Japan and key Western allies. The Japanese have advocated for constructive engagement of the military regime to promote change and have resisted, to varying degrees, pressure by the U.S. for more restrictive policies toward the country. Japan actions are driven by a fear of the spread of Chinese influence and a loss of business opportunities in Burma. While many Western allies of the U.S. may impose bans on government aid to Burma and place sporadic travel restrictions upon senior Burmese government officials, they do little

to halt investment and trade by their business sectors with Burma.

Over the past twenty years, the U.S. has introduced many measures in the UN Security Council to punish the Burmese military regime for its repressive actions. These measures were consistently thwarted by China and in many instances, Russia. Both China and Russia cited “non interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation” as the basis for blocking various U.S. proposals in respect to Burma. In reality, both China and Russia recognize the strategic importance of Burma in terms of its



geographic location and rich inheritance of resources.

Faced by sanctions, the military regime has utilized the country’s natural resources to obtain vital foreign exchange from its willing neighbors. Burma possesses an abundance of natural resources including natural gas, high-quality tropical hardwoods, precious metals and gems, uranium and other mineral deposits, and fisheries. Despite the U.S. ban on textiles, Burma has found new markets for its textile exports in neighboring countries and by trans-

shipments through its neighbors to markets elsewhere. As U.S. firms pulled out of Burma, companies from the neighboring countries eagerly took their places. Burma’s trading relationships with its neighbors have insured a growing and significant flow of funds to the SPDC, thus effectively muting the effects of U.S. sanctions.

China literally rescued the Burmese military regime and became Burma’s most important political ally. It is Burma’s major arms supplier, investor, trading partner, and key ally on the UN Security Council. China refuses to support any measures which interfere in the internal politics of Burma. In the mid-1990s, the Burmese military regime warned the Western nations that it would use its close ties with China to balance against any negative Western initiatives. The West did not heed this warning and as a consequence, Burma is now an economic colony of China and beholden to it for its past, present, and expected future support.

China’s growing role in Burma has forced India to implement a policy of “constructive engagement” toward Burma. It has become increasingly worried that a Burma, strongly influenced by China, would pose a strategic threat to India. Thus, India has concluded agreements with Burma on natural gas purchases, arms sales, trade, aid, and counter-insurgency to try to mitigate China’s influence and also to secure its own energy resources.

Thailand, another neighboring country, needs Burma’s energy and other natural resources to power its economy. So it must step lightly when dealing with the SPDC.

ASEAN is unwilling to interfere in the domestic affairs of any country, including Burma. The member countries of ASEAN have their own economic self-interests to consider in Burma and they do not want to lose them. ASEAN also fears pushing Burma more into the sphere of China and upsetting the balance of power in Southern Asia. These concerns led to the admittance of Burma into ASEAN in 1997.

The U.S. restrictive policies toward Burma are strongly based upon support for Daw Aung San Sui Kyi and her democratic principles. This backing of her is strengthened through the persistent lobbying efforts by Burmese pro-democracy activists. However, the U.S. government, especially the U.S. Congress, has placed too much trust in her judgment and fails to recognize the limits of her influence.

There were opportunities in the 1990s for Daw Aung San Sui Kyi to negotiate with the military regime, but she refused to drop her pre-condition that the military regime recognize the results of the 1990 election long after they lacked

relevancy given the passage of time. The demise of the junta's moderate, General Khin Nyunt, marked one of the key turning points in her importance to the SPDC. Also, the ascendancy of China as a strong economic and political supporter of the military regime, the pervasiveness of the military regime's influence within all key sectors of Burma, and the very strong self-confidence of the SPDC have made Daw Aung San Sui Kyi no longer important.

While I believe that Daw Aung San Sui Kyi finally understands that she has lost the opportunity to engage the SPDC from a position of influence, I am not sure that the U.S. Congress or the Burmese pro-democracy activists outside of Burma see this reality. She has now, unfortunately, become merely a minor irritant such that the SPDC may now feel comfortable in deporting her out of the country and thus muting much of the criticism of the regime for keeping her under house arrest

U.S. restrictive policies have also led to unintended consequences. The chief among these is that sanctions have pushed Burma into a very close relationship with China that may not have otherwise occurred.

China's vested interests in Burma have been directed toward exploiting the country's valuable resources and obtaining access to the Indian Ocean for strategic economic and military purposes. U.S. sanctions toward Burma have provided China the unique opportunity to exploit the easily-assessable natural resources of an adjacent country, develop alternative transportation routes away from the congested Malacca Straits for goods and energy resources, expand its military and intelligence presence to the Indian Ocean, and have a greater voice in the affairs of the region.

This close relationship of Burma with China, fostered as a direct result of U.S. sanctions, has given billions of dollars to the military regime through Chinese military aid and sales of natural resources to China. These funds have been used, in a large part, to greatly strengthen both the size and technical sophistication of the Burmese military. As a consequence, the Burmese military has become emboldened to mount a sustained effort to eliminate the remaining pockets of ethnic insurgencies and bring ceasefire groups firmly under its policy um-

brella of "one country-one military".

For the first time since independence, the suppression of the ethnic insurgencies seems achievable. The most persistent insurgency of the Karens has virtually ended with the split of the Karen armed group along religious lines and the loss of their liberated areas in Eastern Burma. The other armed ethnic groups have been given the alternatives to disarm, become subservient to the Burmese military, or fight the Burmese military. The financial resources and armaments from China have allowed the regime to confidently embark on this strategy.

Fueled by Chinese military aid and earning from the export of natural resources to China, these military counter-insurgency operations have forced tens of thousands of refugees into neighboring Thailand, placing an economic, social, and political burden on the country. Thai-

land is all ready coping with hundreds of thousands of illegal Burmese workers who have fled into the country seeking economic opportunities denied them in Burma. Also these counter-insurgency operations of the Burmese military

have forced people to leave their villages and become refugees in their own country, hiding in the jungle as internally-displaced people and suffering the effects of disease, landmines, and starvation.

China has helped Burma to finance and construct roads, dams, bridges, pipelines, railroads, airfields, and port facilities throughout the country. Recently it was announced that the Chinese have begun work on constructing dual gas and petroleum pipelines that will traverse 900 kilometers across Burma into the Yunnan Province of China, carrying gas from offshore gas fields in the Arakan State and oil from Africa and the Middle East. The construction of this pipeline can be expected to result in the same human rights abuses and uncompensated land confiscations as occurred with the controversial Yadana pipeline built across southern Burma from the Andaman Sea to Thailand. Also Burma is expected to receive in excess of US\$1 billion annually from the use of the pipelines and sales of natural gas to China.

China is the largest investor in Burma and its

**"The situation in Burma is unjust and its people are suffering from the repressive actions of the SPDC. But for the U.S. to cling unwaveringly to measures, which have proven ineffective and are predicated upon miscalculations, flies in the face of reality."**



concepts that underlie human rights and democracy.

The situation in Burma is unjust and its people are suffering from the repressive actions of the SPDC. But for the U.S. to cling unwaveringly to measures, which have proven ineffective and are predicated upon miscalculations, flies in the face of reality. Since their imposition, U.S. sanctions have not fostered greater democracy in Burma or improved human rights. On the

major trading partner with interests in all the key economic sectors, especially in the exploitation of Burma's natural resources. This has led to a vast entry of Chinese business people and workers into Upper Burma, with Mandalay looking more and more like a Chinese city. Thus, Burma is moving further and further into the imperialist and neo-colonialist arms of China. It is now becoming a Chinese colony through its economic and political dependency upon China.

The SPDC saw it in their self-interest to establish diplomatic relations in 2006 with North Korea in 2006. The generals in Burma have found a kindred friend in North Korea, the "hermit state", which has successfully faced U.S. and Western sanctions of one sort or another for the past fifty years. This new relationship has allowed Burma to purchase military hardware from North Korea, exchange military delegations, and use North Korean technicians to supervise the construction of certain military facilities, most notably tunnels for the protection of military personnel and armaments.

U.S. restrictions upon U.S. companies doing business in Burma have kept Burma as China's sweat shop and inhibited its ability for significant economic growth. Burma has not only plentiful natural resources which are being exploited by its imperialist neighbors, but also a large population of highly literate and skilled people. U.S. companies could help to convert Burma's human and economic potential into reality through the infusion of technology, management skills, higher wages, training opportunities, and better working conditions. Workers would be exposed to Western traditions and

contrary, the situation in these respects has worsened.

The benefits that have accrued to Burma as a result of its sales of natural resources and investments by Asian companies and governments have found their way into the pockets of high-ranking military officers, their friends, and their close business associates. Thus, the main victims of the U.S. sanctions have been the Burmese people themselves; the very people who the sanctions were designed to help. The actualities and their strategic implications in Burma must be analyzed objectively, without an emotional overlay, to finally begin to institute a realistic foreign policy which, in the long run, will truly benefit all the people of Burma.

Thus despite U.S. restrictive policies toward Burma, Senior General Than Shwe and his fellow members of the SPDC should be feeling extremely confident now. The position of the military regime has never been stronger. Than Shwe has evidently not forgotten the skills which he acquired during his early years at the military's Psychological Warfare Department. He has shrewdly used sanctions to limit any unwanted social, cultural, or economic influences from the Western countries and as a scapegoat for any of SPDC's own policy failures. Also he has made Daw Aung San Sui Kyi and the U.S. no longer relevant to the military regime, except on his own terms. And thanks to the U.S. sanctions and their supporters, Than Shwe could not be more pleased with the way things have turned out and is probably sleeping very peacefully tonight in Naypyitaw, his "Abode of the Kings".

# U WIN TIN: STILL FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY AT 80

PAUL ROBERTS



life towards the creation of a free and democratic Burma.

Following his release from a 19-year prison term at Rangoon's infamous Insein Prison as a part of the September 2009 general amnesty, the 80 year-old activist and journalist has been unrelenting and outspoken with regard to his political message, stating shortly after his release, "I will keep fighting until the emergence of democracy in this country."

Win Tin has lived up to his word, maintaining an unabashedly critical political stand with regard to Sen.-Gen. Than Shwe and the junta leadership, 2010 national election policy, and the ongoing detention of NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

In his recently published book, the NLD leader offers his appraisal of the current situation in Burma, and the steps necessary for the achievement of national reconciliation.

On his eightieth birthday, U Win Tin released a message describing the dire situation facing pro-democracy activists in Burma, stating:

"The present period is the most suffocating time for all democratic forces [in Burma]. The military tyrants have geared up all-out efforts to launch their life-tenure mechanism

12 March 2010 marked the 80th birthday of one of Burma's most prominent and deeply entrenched pro-democracy activists, U Win Tin. A founding member of the National League for Democracy (NLD), U Win Tin has dedicated his

to full steam."

The venerated activist's birthday message goes on to outline three key resistance mechanisms, which he believes must be embraced by activists in Burma in order to achieve freedom and democracy.

First, democratic forces in Burma must overcome the junta's "fear weapon". Fear and repression are vital elements of control in military-ruled Burma, where there are currently over 2,100 political prisoners detained in prisons across the nation. The media in Burma is notoriously restricted and controlled, and funding levels for social welfare programs such as education and health are shamefully substandard.

Next, U Win Tin identifies unity as a vital "weapon" in resisting the tyranny of Burma's military regime. Since the military took control of the nation in 1962, there have been two

major peaceful uprisings against the regime, though both the student-led 8888 Uprising in 1988 and the monk-led Saffron Revolution in 2007 failed to generate significant political change. Additionally, unity amongst

Burma's ethnic nationalities is a crucial element for strengthening and unifying the pro-democracy movement in Burma.

Finally, U Win Tin urges the cohesive adoption of an "anti-military dictatorship pathway" as the single means towards eradicating tyranny and oppression in Burma.

U Win Tin has paid the ultimate price for his unyielding dedication to democracy in Burma, having spent 19 years in prison. As the ruling junta continues to release election laws for the upcoming national elections, it has become increasingly evident that the military regime has designed the farcical elections so as to gain international legitimacy while maintaining the status quo. Consequently, it will be up to U Win Tin and other pro-democracy activists to stand united in an effort to influence true democratic reform. If the past 80 years are any indication, U Win Tin is up to the challenge.

"The present period is the most suffocating time for all democratic forces [in Burma]. The military tyrants have geared up all-out efforts to launch their life-tenure mechanism to full steam."

## CAMP REPORT: THE KAREN WELFARE HANDICAP ASSOCIATION LIZ SLIPPER



**T**he Karen Welfare Handicap Association was set up in 2000 to provide support for victims of landmines. Until 2005 it was supported solely by individuals in the camp, donating their time and resources to pay for the care of the disabled, when a US-based NGO, Clear Path International, stepped in to offer support.

The KWAH operates out of the Care Villa, a large wooden building in Zone C, the poorest part of Mae La Camp, not far away from the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College. All of its 19 male residents have lost an arm, leg and/or eyesight when they stepped on a landmine in Burma.

11 are full-time residents at Care Villa, because they don't have relatives inside the Camp. Others spend their days there, and return home after eating dinner.

The residents spend their days studying and working. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays they learn English, study the Bible and practice music. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays they work agriculturally, watering vegetables, feeding fish, frogs and pigs, and cleaning the farm. On Sundays they attend Church. Sometimes they leave the Camp altogether and visit the nearby town of Mae Sot, usually to attend the Church there.

Many of the residents are dependent upon the volunteers at KWAH and require constant care, especially those who have lost both hands. Three carers live in the Villa permanently, cooking, cleaning and washing for the residents.

**"Those who've lost both hands, they need help especially for the meal time and cloth washing."**

Lay Ler Kley Htoo, Secretary of the KWAH  
All the residents want to be resettled outside

the Camp, but not all of them have UN Refugee Status, and therefore cannot be officially resettled. Last year, 3 of the landmine victims were resettled in the US.

Clear Path International donates toothpaste and soap, every third day a meal, and 600 baht per day to the KWAH. They are also given donations by visitors to the Camp. The Care Villa is sparsely furnished, with rough wooden floors and camp beds. However, Ler Lay Kler Htoo says that the residents do not ask for more: "Wheelchairs and musical instruments are enough for them."

Some of the residents are former members of the Karen National Liberation Army, while others were simply civilians. Despite their situation, the men regard themselves as lucky to be under the care of the KWAH, when many

**"Burma is the one country that has consistently used landmines on a widespread bases; it is the only one doing so globally. The military industry of Myanmar produces at least three types of mines. One is a plastic mine, which is very difficult to detect, and can remove an arm or a leg." Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan,**

landmine victims remain inside Burma. Landmines are still being used by the SPDC today, and they kill or disable hundreds of people every year. There were 721 civilian casualties in 2008, with 89 killed and 632 injured. Although there is no official information on military casualties, Lanmine Monitor heard of at least 508 soldiers being injured by landmines in 2008.

According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), Burma is third only to Afghanistan and Columbia in terms of landmine casualties. It overtook Cambodia for the first time two years ago. Mines are still actively used by both the 'Tatmadaw', as the military is called, and the many ethnic armies.

Visiting the KWAH in Mae La Camp is an eye-opening experience which shows you the true extent of the devastation that landmines cause. It also demonstrates the resilience and compassion of some

For more information on the KWAH, and to find out how to donate, please email' Ler Lay Kler Htoo at [lerlay\\_kkbbssc@yahoo.com](mailto:lerlay_kkbbssc@yahoo.com).

## ■ NEWS BRIEF

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- Elections laws were released in Burma on March, drawing criticism from around the world and being called a “complete farce” by the Philippine Foreign Secretary.
- Around 3400 villagers from Kyauk Kyi Township have been in hiding from the SPDC in forests near their homes since the end of January.
- The Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burma recommended that the UN should establish a Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity carried out by the Burmese government.
- Aung San Suu Kyi sent an official letter to Than Shawe requesting release or to be allowed to meet with her NLD colleagues, but she has yet to receive a response.
- The junta in Burma have begun sweeping and swift privatisation of government enterprises in order to fund their election campaigns.
- NDL co-founder Tin Oo was released from prison in February, after nearly 7 years in detention.

**We would like to request our readers to kindly notify us of any changes to your mailing address. You can inform us at [burmaissues@burmaissues.org](mailto:burmaissues@burmaissues.org)**

Burma Issues  
235/26 Asoke Dindaeng Road,  
Makkasan, Rajtaevee (Rachathewi)  
Bangkok 10400

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