



Burma Action Ireland

Autumn 2006

Newsletter

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Aung San Suu Kyi speaks with UN Envoy to Burma

On 11 November Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed by Burma's ruling military junta to meet Ibrahim Gambari, the UN's Under Secretary for Political Affairs, who in May had been its first envoy to see her since 2004, and was now on a further four-day visit to the country. Taken by a police motorcade from her home in Rangoon, in which the Nobel Prize winner remains under house arrest, to the regime's State Guest House, she spoke with him there for about an hour. Few details have emerged, but she is known to have expressed her serious concern about the situation in Burma's ethnic regions and her unwavering sympathy and support for the Shan, the Karen and other racial groups, assuring Mr. Gambari that she and her party would not abandon their cause. She was worried too about the health of Hkun Htun Oo, the outspoken leader of the Shan National League for Democracy, who was arrested in 2005 and sentenced to 96 years' imprisonment.

That morning the envoy had flown to the military's new administrative capital Kyetpye/Naypyidan, and met for over an hour with the Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, Senior General Than Shwe, and three other leading generals. The previous day Mr Gambari had observed a meeting at Nyang Hna Pin of the country's National Convention, and had spoken to delegates from the junta-based National Unity Party, state-supported women's associations and ethnic groups who have made ceasefire agreements. The Convention is claimed by the government to represent a first step in a seven-stage 'road-map to democracy',

but critics charge that it is stage-managed by the military, and it has been boycotted by respected ethnic leaders and by Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD).

During his visit, the envoy also met seven members of that party's Central Executive Committee. Topics discussed included the Convention, the general issue of national reconciliation, humanitarian assistance – especially the use of the Three Diseases Fund to combat pandemic HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis – and the implementation of the UN General Assembly's resolution on Burma. According to a NLD spokesperson, Myint Thein, Mr. Gambari said that he envisaged progress in accordance with that resolution, possibly in 'small steps', but overall the party had been dissatisfied by his visit: 'We thought Gambari would meet various political groups in Burma, but we see that he has met only a few people'. He was referring above all, no doubt, to the envoy's not having spoken to important ethnic leaders, veteran politicians or representatives of the 88 Generation students, and one of these, Mya Aye, expressed similar disappointment. They had expected at least significant progress in the situation of the five student leaders currently detained and likely to be sentenced and imprisoned, 'but we have seen no progress at all so far'.

Debbie Stothard, the coordinator of the alternative ASEAN network on Burma, had concerns, as did Wyn Min, a Burmese analyst based in Thailand. Though UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had stated prior to the visit that the values of engagement with Burma



Aung San Suu Kyi and UN Under-Secretary Ibrahim Gambari pictured after their meeting in Rangoon.

should be demonstrated by 'concrete steps forward' on human rights, democratic reforms and national reconciliation, no such concrete steps had been revealed: 'The envoy seemed to be keeping a strict diplomatic line.' As he added, however: 'We shall have to wait and see the results of Gambari's briefing to the Security Council'. Happily, the envoy stated that Aung San Suu Kyi seemed to be in good health, and after his visit the 61-year-old leader's personal physician, Dr. Tin Myo Win, was allowed to see her for the first time since August. On 16 November he gave her an ultrasound medical checkup, and a source close to him has reported: 'She appears to be fine'.

Forced Labour 'A Scourge on Humanity' Declares ILO Leader

In an unprecedented move, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has decided to refer the ruling military junta in Burma to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) because of its failure to address the use of forced labour within the country. Juan Somavia, Director-General of the ILO, declared: "Forced labour is a scourge on humanity. Any government or regime intent on perpetrating it will clash with the ILO head-on." Burma has retained membership of the ILO since Independence. Somavia continued: "The ILO has been committed to dialogue with the Myanmar [Burmese] authorities to solve the problem, but for some time now the message hasn't been

getting through to the Myanmar leadership. The door is still open, but if negotiations are not conducted in good faith, then other ways have to be explored—this is what the Governing Body embarked on today in its reference to the Security Council, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court." According to the ILO report in June 2006, the use of forced labour is endemic around military installations in Burma. Local military commanders seem to regard it as their right to press-gang villagers and central command does nothing to prevent this. The roots of the use of forced labour, according to the ILO, lie in Burma's dire poverty and lack of international engagement.

The recent release of two labour activists, Su Su Nway and Aye Mint, seemed to indicate some softening of the regime's attitude, but the failure to respond to ILO demands by a specified October deadline has once again disappointed the international community. Although the ILO is not empowered to deliver legally binding judgements, their opinions are most often taken up in UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, which lay an obligation on member states to observe them. It is hoped that this will bring further international pressure to bear on the regime, whose brutal record is already on the agenda of the UNSC.



HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE

"It was like before I had no eyes", a seventeen-year old student says of the nine-month's training she received at the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth (SSSNY), which was founded by a group of Shan refugees in 2001. Her classmates are equally enthusiastic in their assessment of what the course has meant to them – a liberating experience, an awakening, a chance to have hope for the future.

Currently there are several hundred thousand Shan refugees in Thailand. Unlike other ethnic groups, the Shan have not received refugee status from the Thai government, which would entitle them to health and education services and freedom of movement. The vast majority are migrant workers employed as fruit-pickers, farm labourers, construction workers or in the textile factories. However, there are others who have not managed to gain legal status and must live in constant fear of arrest and deportation. There are also about 5000 Shan refugees living in unofficial camps along the Shan-Thai border, supported by grassroot organizations such as the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) and the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF). Most of these camps were originally in Thailand, but were pushed back across the border by Thai authorities. These refugees are living in small pockets of territory protected by Shan resistance forces and are vulnerable to attack by the regime's troops at any time. As recently as

last week, Thai security forces reported shelling and machine gun fire by the Burmese army into one of these camps.

The School for Shan State Nationalities Youth was set up to give young people from Shan State the skills necessary to help their people. The students come from diverse backgrounds and have varying levels of previous education. Students range in age from 15 to 28 years and come from the different ethnic groups in the Shan State such as Palaung, Pa-O, Wa, Lahu, Shan and Kachin. They may have attended school in Burma which operates a 'learning by rote' policy or had some classes given by volunteer NGOs, or they may have been educated in the unofficial camps inside Shan State. Some have travelled hundreds of kilometers inconspicuously to the border, illegally crossing it and risking arrest and deportation; some were child soldiers, others were abused by the military and another spent time in prison for singing a song. However, all are committed to improving the political, economic, educational, social, and health conditions in Shan State.

The nine-month course includes training in English language, computer skills, basic mathematics as well as media, health, environmental and social studies. The students have the opportunity to learn about their homeland, the cultures and traditions of their ethnic neighbours, what human rights are and they have a safe place

where they can discuss and exchange ideas. The school is in a quiet area of Thailand, the location of which is not made public and for safety reasons, the students are confined to the school for the duration of the term. The larger rooms have been converted into classrooms and the smaller ones into dorms where students sleep on the floor – six to a room. Since the school was set up, there have been about 100 graduates, most of whom are now working with organizations such as SWAN, SHRF and the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN).

The school is empowering young people and building their capacity to participate in the human rights and democracy movement. It is highly regarded throughout the Burmese community both in Thailand and in Burma. In January 2007, the school will increase its intake from 36 to 54 students but many more are waiting to be educated. Burma Action Ireland and the Irish people part-funded the set-up of the school in 2001 and have recently raised over €600 for the school. SSSNY is in need of our continued support to train the future community leaders who offer the only hope for so many people.

As part of their training program, the students of 2006 produced a CD of their own songs, available from BAI for €10.

Fair Trade Town Kinsale Hosts Burma Photograph Exhibition

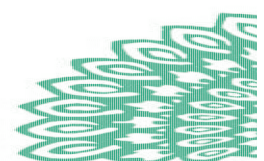
'Burma: Forgotten Nation, Forgotten People', the exhibition of photographs taken on the Thai-Burma border by Cork photographer, Philip Daly, who accompanied Simon Coveney, TD MEP, on his fact-finding visit to the refugee camps, was shown in Derry and Kinsale recently. These beautiful photographs provide a powerful testament to the humanity and determination of the refugees. Both events were a great success and BAI would like to thank all those involved in hosting the exhibitions: in Derry, Fr. Paul Farren, Anne Marie, Thérèse and Sr. Perpetua at the Thornhill Centre deserve particular mention as do Padraig Fitzgerald, Chairperson of the Kinsale Fair Trade Committee and the management and staff of the Blue Haven Hotel in Kinsale.

BAG-PACKING FOR BURMA

Burma Action Ireland members and supporters took part in a bag-pack at the Nutgrove Tesco supermarket, Rathfarnham, on 28 October, to raise funds for the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth (SSSNY). A superb €620 was raised and BAI would like to thank all those who donated. All of this money will be donated to SSSNY to help with basic literacy training and computer skills for Burmese refugees. BAI would also like to thank Tesco Ireland for facilitating this event, especially Kiera at Nutgrove, and the volunteers who gave up their Saturday morning to pack the bags for us, in particular Una who organized them so efficiently.



Burma Action Ireland held a vigil on Grafton Street in Dublin on 24 October to mark the day Burma's democracy leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, completed eleven years in detention. BAI would like to thank all the volunteers who helped with this event.





Update on Burma

Condoleezza Rice urges Burma to overcome its "adversarial" attitude

On 18 November, US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, urged North Korea and Burma to follow the example of its 'enemy' turned trade partner Vietnam, and overcome their "adversarial" attitude. "The United States continues to look to the day when cooperation is possible with Burma and with North Korea," Rice told a forum on the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Hanoi. "So far these governments have chosen to reject the path of cooperation, violating their agreements and isolating their countries from the prosperity of the region," she said. But Rice said the new partnership between the United States and Vietnam "shows how the past can be overcome for the benefit of countries." "There are other countries with which we hope to overcome difficult circumstances too," she said, naming the two military-ruled regimes. "If the leaders of Burma and North Korea would follow the example of Vietnam and the example of other adversaries throughout history who have overcome their adversarial history... it will open a new path of peace and opportunity."

Burma visit for new Thai PM

Thailand's interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont travelled to Burma for his first official visit on 23 November last, as part of a diplomatic tour of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members. During his Naypyidaw talks, Surayud discussed plans to register Burmese migrants working in Thailand. The Burmese military recently approved documents for 10,000 Burmese citizens allowing them to apply for visas to work legally in Thailand. Other topics discussed during the meeting included energy cooperation, closer joint efforts on narcotics eradication and health issues especially the problem of HIV/ AIDS. Surayud has always been a vocal critic of Burma's reluctance to stop the flow of narcotics from the north of the country into Thailand and has been sympathetic to the refugees along the border.

Membership of Burma's NLD increasing

Despite intimidation by Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which is trying to weaken Daw Suu Kyi's National

League for Democracy (NLD) party, membership in the NLD party has been increasing.

While the state-run newspapers are carrying daily news about NLD members resigning from the party, the number of new members is increasing, said Nyan Win, spokesperson for the NLD. "We began recruiting new members about two years ago. We regularly get new membership application forms even though our offices are not there (closed down by the military government). The number of new recruits has increased even more especially since they started frequently carrying news in the newspapers about NLD members resigning." Nyan Win continued: "Most of them (members) are young people and students, including female members. We approve the member applications after NLD members in the respective wards, endorse the credentials of the new applicants."

Red Cross forced to stop more Burma activities

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been forced to halt several of their projects in Burma after the authorities ordered their field operations to be managed from Rangoon. The ICRC has field offices in Hpa-an, Keng Tung, Mandalay, Moulmein and Taunggyi. It is impossible, according to the organization, for the health and sanitation activities of these offices to be managed from Rangoon for logistical reasons. The ICRC have no immediate plans to withdraw from Burma, but it is likely the organization will have to consider what the new restrictions mean for their operations.

Lavish wedding for Senior General Than Shwe's daughter Thandar Shwe

Burma's military chief, Senior General Than Shwe, hosted a lavish wedding in July for his daughter Thandar Shwe. A leaked video of the wedding, first seen on Burmese internet forums in late October, shows Thandar Shwe and her groom Major Zaw Phyo Win, Deputy Director of the Ministry of Commerce, at the ceremony. Thandar Shwe appears dressed in exquisite finery with a variety of jewels – mostly diamonds. The video depicting the bountiful occasion, in a country where one in ten children die before their fifth birthday, has provoked criticism from both in and outside Burma.

Membership renewal, every euro matters

Membership subscriptions for the next twelve months are now due for renewal and a form is enclosed with this edition. (If you have kindly paid a membership fee in recent months, please ignore this letter). All subscriptions/donations enable Burma Action Ireland carry out its public awareness activities – such as street petitions, printing this newsletter and other materials and hosting of Burmese speakers in Ireland. Every euro matters, and sincere thanks to those of you who renew your membership annually or give donations.

Christmas Card/New Year Greeting

"I hope the world will not forget us"

(Aung San Suu Kyi).

If you would like to send a Christmas card or New Year card to Aung San Suu Kyi, her postal address is: **54 University Avenue, Bahan 11201, Yangon, Myanmar (Burma).**

Aung San Suu Kyi's high profile is one of the things that has kept her alive, but there are growing concerns for her safety. The cards will probably be intercepted by the military regime, but the generals will know that the world is watching, and that will help to keep her safe. BAI wishes all its friends and supporters a very happy Christmas.





Book Review: *True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border*

Jonathan Falla, [with a foreword by Nigel Barley]
Cambridge University Press ISBN 0521399203
pbk, Price: £33.00stg (US\$58.00). First published in
hardback 1991, paperback 2006.

The re-publication of this book is timely. The Karen people of Burma, the 'rebels' of the title, are currently under renewed attack by the Burmese army. Their situation is no less desperate than it was when Falla first wrote: "as the Burmese army closes in, their choices are horribly limited and many of them simply don't know what to do ... their villages are being burnt, their men shot and their women raped." Falla spent the year of 1986-7 living with the Karen in the area that had originally been designated as their 'semi-independent state' of Kawthoolei. But now, nearly twenty years after Falla was there, the Karen's tenure of their homeland is even more insecure, because First General Than Shwe (of the Burmese military regime known as the State Peace and Development Council or SPDC) has declared his 'new capital' at nearby

Pyinmana and the Burmese army is again driving them out. Only this spring, thousands more Karen people were driven into the refugee camps on the Thai border.

However, this is far from being a sentimental portrait of the Karen. Equally Falla does not see them in the way an ethnographer might - with professional curiosity - but in a much fresher, simply human way, as people who are trying to live their social and family lives in spite of the war which has been waged on them for the last forty years. He does not try to sort out the complexities of the history of the Karen 'revolution' but concentrates on giving a vivid and lively portrait of the people as he knew them. 'True Love' and 'Bartholomew' are two of the men from the village where Falla worked as a nurse. The village included Karen who had been brought up in Rangoon as well as people from the hills of Kawthoolei. Falla describes the village as containing 'a bizarre forest hybrid of tradition and revolution, with a powerful character of its own.'

Although the war is ever-present in the background, Falla gives it surprisingly little attention. He is chiefly interested in the people themselves and their ideas. We are introduced to many of the villagers as individuals - their feelings, their frames of mind, their compatibilities. The chapters take themes such as the social arrangements, or the importance of the river in people's lives, their music, their work; Falla does not try to force this richly experienced life into a single narrative or to make heroes and heroines out of the real people he knew. Yet as the book progresses and all are touched by the tragedy of the 'revolution', there is an increasing sadness and poignancy in the writing. As one reads the final chapters, the sense of death and loss is overwhelming, even though it is barely spoken about either by Falla or by the Karen themselves. It is a tribute to the quality of Falla's writing that the reader can gradually come to this profoundly touching awareness for himself.

Mary Montaut.

How you can help

BECOME A MEMBER OF BAI

BAI is always pleased to welcome new members. Members are encouraged to become active in one of BAI's voluntary subcommittees: political, awareness and campaigns and fundraising and assistance. Please contact Mary Montaut at BAI (number given below) if you would like to speak to someone about joining the group. In addition, there are other ways you can help the people of Burma from your own home or office:

ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

Write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dermot Ahern, TD (Bishop's Square, Redmond's Hill, Dublin 2), your local county/urban district councillor, TD and/or MEP to let them know of your concern for human rights in Burma. Urge them to raise the Burma issue at every level of the political process and:

- Take all necessary measures toward a speedy restoration of democracy in Burma,
- Demand the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi,
- Express your concerns about the torture in prisons and the growing HIV/AIDS crisis in the country.

The oppression of the Burmese people and the detention of Daw Suu Kyi

Write appeals to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) the Burmese military regime, calling for the safe release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all Burmese political prisoners. Daw Suu Kyi has been in and out of detention in Burma since 1989. She was held under house arrest from 1989 - 1995, and again under virtual house arrest from 2000 - 2002. She was then arrested in May 2003 after the Depayin massacre (in Burma), during which up to 100 of her supporters were beaten to death by the regime's militia. She is currently under house arrest in Rangoon. In addition to asking for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, please ask the SPDC to take action on the following:

- To end the continuing violations of human rights, in particular forced labour, forced relocations, abuse, torture, sexual violence, exploitation and abuse in detention and summary executions, often committed by military personnel;
- To end the systematic forced displacements of persons and the flow of refugees to neighbouring countries and create adequate conditions for their safe and voluntary return and complete reintegration, and to allow humanitarian personnel safe access to assist their return and reintegration.

Please address your action letters to the following:

Lieutenant General Soe Win,
Prime Minister,
State Peace and Development Council,
Ministry of Defence, Signal Pagoda Road,
Dagon Post Office,
Yangon, Union of Myanmar.

BAI would appreciate it very much if you could send us a copy of your letter(s).

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Disclaimer: The views expressed herein are those of Burma Action Ireland and can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of Irish Aid.

Thank you to Deputy Máire Hocktor, TD, Senator Paschal Mooney, Senator Joanna Tuffy and Senator Brendan Ryan for the posting of this newsletter. Their support is appreciated.

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:
Eileen Seymour

