



Burma Action Ireland

Spring 2007

Newsletter

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Burma's Prime Minister-in-Exile visits Ireland

On 23 and 24 April 2007, Burma's Prime Minister-in-Exile and cousin of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, **Dr Sein Win**, visited Dublin as part of a lobbying tour of European countries where he met with **Minister Conor Lenihan TD**, at the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Representing the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), Dr Sein Win and his colleague, **Dr Thaung Htun**, the NCGUB's representative to the UN, briefed the Minister on the current situation in Burma and discussed ways in which Ireland can continue to play a role in pushing for democratic reform in Burma.

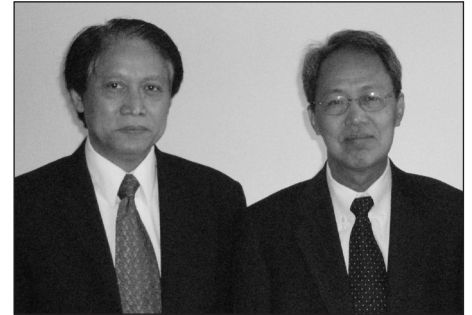
Minister Lenihan expressed the Government's deep concern at the human rights situation and reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to supporting political change, peaceful reconciliation and respect for human rights in Burma. The Minister said:

"I am horrified by reports of the use of rape as a weapon by the military regime in

their ongoing campaign against civilians in conflict areas. The regime in Burma must immediately put a stop to this utterly reprehensible practice, as well as other serious human rights violations. I remain deeply concerned at the continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and would, once again, urge the Burmese government to restore fully her freedom and civil liberties, as well as those of other political prisoners."

The delegation, accompanied by BAI Chairperson, **Ms Eileen Seymour**, also met with Deputies Michael Woods, Bernard Allen and Michael D. Higgins from the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs, Deputy Dan Boyle, Senators David Norris and Mary Henry as well as Front Line's Mary Lawlor and David Joyce and David Begg from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

Dr Sein Win was elected Prime Minister following the formation of the NCGUB in Manerplaw (Karen State, Burma) in 1990 but was prevented from taking office by



Left to right: Recent visitors to Dublin, Dr Thaung Htun and Dr Sein Win.

the Burmese military regime. He is the son of U Ba Win, one of Burma's top political leaders and elder brother of General Aung San, the architect of Burma's independence and founder of the Burma Army, and first cousin of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Burma's democracy movement. Originally based on the Thai-Burma border and now in Washington DC, Dr Sein Win has travelled extensively seeking international support for a political settlement in Burma. He has visited Ireland on a number of occasions.

Chin women reveal further evidence of state-sanctioned rape

The New Delhi-based Women's League of Chinland (WLC) have published a report titled **'Unsafe State: State-sanctioned sexual violence against Chin women in Burma'**. The report aims to highlight the plight of Chin women, Chin State, Burma, who are living in fear of being sexually assaulted.

The 38-page document, launched in New Delhi on 27 March, outlines 38 alleged cases of rape committed by Burmese military soldiers against Chin women and girls aged as young as 12. Despite tight military controls in the isolated Chin hills, the WLC have managed to document these cases of sexual violence, committed with impunity by the Burma army throughout Chin state, mostly during the past five years. Almost half of the cases were gang rapes, and at least a third committed by officers.

"The 38 cases of sexual violence in this report are corroborative evidence that the regime is using rape as a strategy of war against women and girls in ethnic areas in order to terrorize and demoralize local communities and weaken resistance to military rule," the report said.

The Burmese regime has quadrupled its military presence in Chin State in recent years, and the militarization is set to worsen if recent plans go ahead to export natural gas from the Burmese coast by pipeline through Chin State to India. (See also Update on Burma section). The WLC also called on the Indian government to stop weapons sales to Burma and to avoid supporting the military regime. Former Indian Minister of Defence, Mr George Fernandes said at the press conference marking the release of the report that he would bring the document to the attention of the Indian government.

UNSAFE STATE



State-sanctioned sexual violence against Chin women in Burma

Unsafe State, a recent publication documenting sexual violence



Are we helping to devastate Burma's forests?



Burmese teak.

Forests worldwide, including those in Burma, are being destroyed by illegal logging at an accelerating rate to feed the sawmills of China for export to the West. That is the message from a year-long investigation in seven countries reported on in February by a team from *The Washington Post*. Huge expansion at Chinese factories, whose exports of wood furniture increased eightfold by 2005, has required a commensurate increase in imports, and both (exports and imports), predicts 'Forest Trends', a consortium of industry and conservation groups, will double again within ten years.

In the north-eastern Burmese province of Kachin, home to one of the Earth's last natural stands of teak, the devastation caused by logging is particularly acute, as is shown by satellite images that accompany the Post's report, which also maps the routes by which the timber travels.

Also, between 2001 and 2004, the cross-border trade, says the London environment group 'Global Witness', swelled by 60%; in 2005 it reached \$350 million. Officially there are legal limits, but corruption is endemic. In Myitkina local agents showed the Post's correspondent detailed records of large bribes they themselves had passed on to officials and soldiers. In the first half of 2005, they said, that over 120 Chinese workers encamped on a mountain-top near the town of Bhamo and "cut the whole mountain", and hauled away about 3,000 tons of teak.

Environmental activists have appealed to some of the West's largest sellers to adopt conservation policies. In particular, the 'Forest Stewardship Council', set up in 1990, certifies products, which they can show have been legally sourced. Though many companies have declined to co-operate, high-profile ones that do, include one familiar here, the Swedish home-furnishings company Ikea. As the Post says, "Ikea cultivates a green image, filling its cavernous stores ... with signs asserting that its products are made in ways that minimize environmental harm," and it sends a small number of auditors and foresters to attempt to trace its timber to logging sites. But sending more would make its products more expensive. "It's about cost", said Thomas Bergmark, the Ikea global manager for social and environmental affairs; "it would take enormous resources if we trace back each and every wood supply chain. We can never guarantee that each and every log is from the right source". In fact, although two years ago the company aimed by 2009 to have at least 30% of its timber certified by the Council, it says now that only 4% of the wood used to make its products in China meets that grade. Let the buyer beware.

AGM Notice

The Annual General Meeting of Burma Action Ireland will take place on **Monday 11 June 2007 at 7.30pm**. The venue is Loreto Hall, 77 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2. The meeting will include a report from both the Chairperson and Treasurer of BAI and the election of new officers. You are very welcome to attend and to bring a friend. Refreshments will be served. Thank you for your support.

Burma countrywide

Since Christmas, BAI's Co-ordinator, Mary Montaut has been invited to give talks around the country. In February, she visited **Kinsale** Community School to give a talk about Burma to transition year students, and the following day she went to Deerpark School in **Ballythehane** - also in County Cork, where she spoke to both transition and second year students. Although the students in the main, were unfamiliar with the situation in Burma, they responded with interest to the talks and to the issues affecting the country such as the nature of the military dictatorship and its history. The other area of particular interest to the students in what is now known as the resource 'curse'- Burma's natural wealth, which is used to keep the military in power. (See also *Update on Burma* section).

The Co-ordinator has also given seminars to students of Development Studies at University College, **Cork** (UCC) and to the Women's Centre in Letterkenny, focussing on the effects on women of the military dictatorship. The students at the latter Centre participate in the Women's Studies Outreach programme organised by University College, **Dublin** (UCD). On International Women's Day (8 March), the Co-ordinator took part in a seminar in UCD, under the aegis of the Women's Resource and Research Centre. The topic was 'Women in War'. Other speakers included Commandant Mary Carroll of the Defence Forces, who spoke about women in Afghanistan, and Dr Theresa O'Keefe of Equality Studies who brought feminist theory to bear on the topic.

If you would like Mary Montaut to speak at your school/college/workplace, please contact her on: 087 1261857.



Belfast to next host Burma photo exhibition

Burma: Forgotten Nation, Forgotten People is a series of photographs by the Cork based photographer, **Philip Daly**, who last year travelled to the Thai Burma Border with **Simon Coveney, TD, MEP**. His photographs, which are a powerful testament to the people of Burma, were first unveiled on 19 June 2006 at the Market Bar in Dublin. **19 June is the birthday of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi**, the democratically elected leader of Burma and freewoman of both Dublin and Galway. Since June, the exhibition has travelled to places as far apart geographically as Kinsale and Derry. Burma Action Ireland is extremely grateful to all those who supported the exhibition, particularly those who mounted and hosted the exhibitions. Simon Coveney

and Philip Daly are also to be warmly thanked for undertaking their fact-finding mission to the Burmese refugee camps.

Burma: Forgotten Nation, Forgotten People will be in Belfast next, hosted by Amnesty International Northern Ireland. The exhibition will be held in Cultúrlann, 216 Falls Road, Belfast from **1- 30 June**.

If you would like to mark Aung San Suu Kyi's 62nd birthday this coming June, please send a birthday card to her at **54 University Avenue, Bahan 11201, Yangon, Myanmar (Burma)**. Aung San Suu Kyi's high profile is one of the things which has kept her alive but there are concerns for her safety. The cards will probably be intercepted by the military, but the Generals will know that the world is watching and that will help keep her safe.



Viewing *Forgotten Nation, Forgotten People*: Fr Paul Farren, Director of the Derry Diocesan Catechetical Centre with Mr Simon Coveney, TD, MEP. (Thornhill Centre, Derry).



Viewing *Forgotten Nation, Forgotten People*: Mr Tom Bonnar, Mrs Pat Hume and Sister Margaret at the exhibition in Derry. (Thornhill Centre, Derry).

Update on Burma

Margareta Wahlstrom visited Burma

On 5-7 April, UN Assistant Secretary-General for humanitarian affairs, Ms Margareta Wahlstrom visited Burma. The UN's discussions with Burmese officials focused on access to war-ravaged Karen State and restricted Muslim populations in Northern Arakan State as well as the plight of former opium farmers and Burmese children, who suffer among the worst mortality rates in Asia.

India's links with Burma

India has been moving increasingly close to the regime in Burma, supplying arms, loans, and making significant investments in the country.

Access to Burma's gas deposits, its desire to counter Chinese influence in Burma and its need for cooperation from the regime to help tackle insurgents in the north-east of India, (some of whom have bases across the border in Burma's jungles), all mean that India is prioritising its own economic interests above human rights.

The most significant investment is India's involvement in the Shwe gas project, (a project previously reported in this newsletter) which will include a gas pipeline running to India. Indian companies ONGC Videsh (Oil and Natural Gas Company

Videsh, India), and GAIL (The Gas Authority of India Limited, India) are partners in the gas project being led by South Korea's Daewoo. The project is expected to become the regime's largest single source of revenue, providing, on average, US\$ 580 million per year for the regime for twenty years, or a total of US\$ 12 billion. "Indian companies investing in the Shwe gas project are funding a regime that tortures, rapes, kills our people," said Maung Zan from the All Arakan Students and Youth Congress. "India should not be investing in Burma."

*"With all the crimes of the
Burmese military, the Buddha
will never leave prison,
will always be in trouble..."*

Poet and former prisoner, Tin Moe, RIP
(aged 71 years)

Burma – a short cut conduit for China

China, according to the journal *The Irrrawaddy* (April) could end up paying the Burmese military regime US\$ 9 billion as 'rent' for building oil and gas pipelines across the country. If any such deal was to go ahead, half of that sum would most likely be

used by the Chinese government to use Burma as a short cut conduit for shipping oil to the middle east and Africa and to China's developing southwest provinces. The other half would be for piping Burma's own gas from the Shwe Off Shore Fields in the Bay of Bengal. Thailand also invests in Burma. It currently pays the junta about US\$ 1 billion a year for the gas it exploits beneath the Burma section of the Andaman sea.

Karenni attacks

The Burmese military has been shelling the Karenni National Progressive Party's (KNPP) stronghold in Nyamu, near the Thai-Burma border, according to the group's general secretary Raymond Htoo. The attacks started on 27 March, after KNPP and Burmese military representatives held a series of peace talks in the Shan border town of Tachileik. The KNPP signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military in 1995, but the pact fell through after Burmese troops entered the Karenni group's control area. "It would be better if they did not carry out these kinds of acts of intimidation, because it is very hard to keep full faith in them," Raymond Htoo said. Fresh attempts at peace talks between the rebel group and the Burmese military have failed in the past 10 years, with the last round of discussions abandoned after the former prime minister and military intelligence leader general Khin Nyunt was placed under house arrest in October 2004.



Bag pack at Tesco helps replace water system

BAI volunteers turned out again for a *Bag Pack* in Tesco's in Rathfarnham, Dublin 16 on 31 March, to raise money for refugees on the Thailand-Burma border. (Last October there was a Bag Pack at the Nutgrove branch). Their efforts in Rathfarnham brought in €625. This sum, together with other monies raised by BAI amounting to a **total of €1,500** has been directly sent to a clinic for internally displaced persons in the Shan State, Burma. Three thousand people live in this camp and their

water-system was destroyed by fire in March. Clean water is a priority in the camp, where the clinic treats a number of common illnesses such as malaria, respiratory ailments and diarrhoea as well as mine injuries. Over a recent six-month period, 2,346 outpatients and 155 inpatients were treated. The clinic also operates a supplementary feeding programme: food supplements of milk, lentils, eggs, potatoes are given to pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and to underweight

children; one-month-old infants, pregnant mothers and children under 5 are also given Vitamin A supplements every 6 months.

If you would like to donate to BAI's AID Account, which assists locally-based Burma related projects, the Bank Account is located at the AIB in Stillorgan, County Dublin. The account number is: 20403236 and the sort code of the branch is 933570.

BAI would like to thank the volunteers and Tesco Ireland for this successful pack.

How you can help

The military regime in Burma has one of the worst human rights records in the world: it has one of the highest levels of forced labour; more than 1,100 political prisoners; more child soldiers than any other country; over 60% of Burmese people living in poverty; rape is routinely used as a weapon of war; nearly half of the government budget is spent on the military.

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/ fundraising and assistance. Please contact Mary Montaut at BAI (number given below) if you would like to speak to someone about joining the group. The AGM is coming up on Monday 11 June (see notice) and you are very welcome to come along and attend. In addition, there are other ways you can help the people of Burma from your own home or office:

ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES and CANVASSERS

Write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dermot Ahern, TD (Iveagh House, 80 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2), your local county / urban district councillor, TD and/or MEP to

let them know of your concern for human rights in Burma. Also candidates going forward in the forthcoming General Election will be out and about listening to your views and looking for your vote. 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 opposition to the use of torture in prisons, the growing AIDS/health crisis, sexual violence against women (see the article about Unsafe State publication) and the exploitation of natural resources in the country (see the article about Burma's forests).

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. This detention has to stop. 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 the human rights of women, 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 Máire Hocht, TD 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

