



# Burma Action Ireland

Summer 2007

## Newsletter

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# Aung San Suu Kyi spends yet another birthday under house arrest

On **19 June**, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who is a Nobel laureate (1991) and a Freewoman of both Dublin (2000) and Galway (2005), spent her 62nd birthday in detention, totalling 11 years and 238 days (4,253 days) under house arrest since 1989. She is isolated in her house in Rangoon, allowed no visitors, her phone line has been cut and her post is intercepted.

Burma Action Ireland highlighted the continued detention of Daw Suu Kyi with a lunchtime birthday reception in Dublin hosted by film maker John Boorman, the group's Honorary President. Attendees included **Minister of State, Tom Kitt, TD, Deputy Liz McManus, TD, Mr Garech de Brun** and diplomatic representatives from several countries including South Africa, Switzerland and Norway. The US, Canada, the UK, Poland, Japan, Switzerland and many other countries also marked her birthday, calling on their Governments to act to secure her release and to restore freedom and democracy in the country. Readings and performances of a new play *The Lady of Burma* – a one woman show about Daw Suu Kyi – took place in seven countries on the day and in eleven locations around the UK including Northern Ireland.

Aung San Suu Kyi is a symbol of hope for the people of Burma, a country with one of the world's worst human rights records. Speaking at



*John Boorman, Film Maker and Aung San Phyoo, BAI cut the cake.*

the birthday event, **Eileen Seymour, Chairperson of BAI** said: "We remain extremely concerned at the continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi. We urge the Irish Government to continue to pressurize Burma's military junta to restore her freedom and liberty and to end immediately the suffering of the Burmese people by committing to democratic reform. The EU and the UN must



*Pictured at the Birthday celebration: (left to right) Ambassador D Priscilla S Jana of South Africa, Minister of State, Tom Kitt, TD, David Joyce, ICTU and Róisín Boyd.*

start engaging in serious diplomatic initiatives, and the regime given a message that it cannot act with impunity. The human rights violations in Burma cannot be allowed to continue".

*BAI wishes to thank Stephen's Green Hotel, Dublin and musicians Keith Donald and Gerry Lynch for giving their valuable time and talent to BAI on the 19 June.*

## Burmese refugees suffering abuse in other SE Asian countries

In Kuala Lumpur, in early July, ASEAN's\* Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus, denouncing yet again the actions of Burma's military junta, but highlighting also the recent arrest in Malaysia of recognized refugees from Burma, expressed deep concern about numerous violations in their region of the rights of asylum-seekers.

In Bangkok, almost simultaneously, a National Seminar was held as a follow-up to a Declaration, signed by the ASEAN countries in January, which committed them to protect the fundamental human rights of their migrant workers. At this Seminar, Thailand's Minister of Labour, Apai Chandanachulaka, declared that his country agreed to implement that Convention, but a member of its Human Rights Commission, Sunee Chairot, asserting that the rights of many such migrant workers had been abused both by employers and by government

officials, asked him to establish a legal aid centre to assist them.

Thailand has at least two million migrant workers, mostly refugees from Burma's persecuted ethnic minorities, and in fact their situation, says the human rights researcher Adisorn Kerdmonkol, "is going from bad to worse. The prevailing view in our society is that they are potential criminals and are a threat to national security," he said. In some provinces new measures have banned Burmese migrants from using mobile phones or motorcycles and holding gatherings of more than five people, even for religious celebrations. Many, overworked and underpaid, are cheated by their employers, and if sacked for complaining they immediately become illegal aliens subject to deportation back to Burma. In general, according to Adisorn, they "still suffer from slave-like conditions".

Soe Moe, an ethnic Mon, tells a grim story. In 2004 he was among 110 aboard six deepsea trawlers bound for Indonesian waters. When the fleet returned in 2006, 39 had died of severe malnutrition, mostly because they had anchored in the open sea without food or fresh water while fishing permits were renegotiated. But the survivors were denied wages, and the authorities refused to investigate or compensate the families of the dead. "Such state apathy", according to Adisorn, "is the norm, rather than the exception".

\*ASEAN: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok and comprises Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Phillipines, Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei, Burma, Laos & Cambodia with a total population of about 500 million.



# The future 'Institute of Higher Education' in a Refugee Camp

By Niamh de Loughry

Niamh de Loughry is the Education Programme Coordinator at one of the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border where over 100,000 Burmese refugees live. The refugees are mainly from the Karen ethnic group and, with the help of local and international NGOs, have set up their own education system up to secondary level.

The prospect of a school losing most of its funding would, under the best of circumstances, be deemed as a crisis. However, in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border it was just what they needed for them to stand back and reassess their situation.

In refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, the highest level of education is at 'Post Ten' level. Secondary school finishes at 'Ten Standard'. The first 'Post Ten' programme started in 1995 and since then, they have been sprouting in every camp. They were created because the number of high school graduates continued to increase; but with little or no opportunity to continue education outside of the camps, community leaders and education personnel realised that there was a need to set up 'Post Ten' or tertiary programmes in order to provide an opportunity for these graduates to continue their studies in camp.

Over the last ten years what has happened is that each 'Post Ten' school has operated with its own aim and objectives and thus there has been limited cooperation and link between the programmes.

With a sudden funding crisis looming among two of the more established schools, the Karen Education Department – Office of Higher Education initiated open discussion and debate with the schools about how they could combine their skills and resources.

The outcome is the 'Institute of the Higher Education'. This initiative will consist of six different campuses in five of the refugee camps along the

Thai-Burma border. The first two years will be standardised in all the campuses focusing on English language skills and research methodology, before choosing one of the following areas to stream in:

- Department of Community Management
- Department of Economics
- Department of Law
- Department of Public Health
- Department of South East Asia Studies
- Department of Science & Arts
- Department of Teacher Preparation

The concept has thus far been well received by community leaders and NGO's. It aims to begin in the next academic year 2008-2009. At present three of the departments/schools participating are funded by Child's Dream ([www.childsdream.org](http://www.childsdream.org))\*. At this stage the departments are looking to expand their libraries and find suitably qualified overseas Karen to teach in the relevant areas. Foreign volunteers and donations of books are welcome - enquiries should be sent to [niamhdel@yahoo.com](mailto:niamhdel@yahoo.com).

\*Child's Dream Association is a charity organisation dedicated to unconditional help for underprivileged children in the 'Mekong Sub-Region'.

## UN Child Soldiers' Envoy visits Burma

The UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict (Child Soldiers), Ms Radhika Coomaraswamy, visited Burma for five days at the end of June and met with Junior Officials in the military junta in an effort to set up monitoring and reporting mechanisms. Ms Coomaraswamy's visit follows the UN Security Council Resolution on Children and Armed Conflict in 2005. After her visit, Ms Coomaraswamy said that the Burmese government had agreed to appoint a high level 'focal point' from their Ministry of Social Welfare to engage with the UN Country Team, especially UNICEF, on all issues relating to children and armed conflict.

However, doubts have been expressed by refugee and human rights organizations about the junta's real intentions. A similar promise to reform the practice of forcing under-age boys into military service was received from the junta in 2004, but the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) based in Thailand, produced a report - *Promises: Child Soldiers in Burma's Armed Forces* - later that year showing that no improvement had been made.

It is believed that Burma has the highest number of child soldiers in the world. Not all of these are in the Burmese Army (Tatmadaw); insurgent groups from the persecuted ethnic minorities also stand accused of using under-age children in their armed struggles against the regime. In 2002, Human Rights Watch reported that as many as 70,000 children could be involved.

The Report of the Special Representative is due to be examined by the UNSC Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict in November 2007.

## No longer a Pipe Dream

As reported in BAI's spring newsletter, money raised by BAI (€1,500) primarily through backpacking was recently sent to the Shan State in Burma, directly to a health clinic based in a camp for 3,000 internally displaced people. Their water system had been destroyed by fire in March and funding was urgently needed to restore the system. The camp's water supply is now working again (see pictures below) because of people's generosity. If you would like to backpack and could give BAI some of your time, please contact Mary Montaut on 087 1261857. BAI backpacks only occasionally and forthcoming dates are:

Saturday, **6 October, Tesco @ Bloomfield Centre, Dún Laoghaire, Co Dublin.**

Saturday, **10 November, Tesco @ Stillorgan Shopping Centre, Dublin.** The funds raised at these packings go directly to small locally-based projects in Burma or on the border which BAI is familiar with. BAI wishes to thank volunteers who have helped to date.





# Update on Burma

## National Convention resumes amid criticism

The Burmese military's widely-criticised National Convention resumed on 18 July for what has been described as its final session before a new Burmese constitution is drafted and put to a national referendum. Opposition groups from across Burma, including the National League for Democracy, have criticised the process calling it a sham designed to "perpetuate military rule". International rights group, Human Rights Watch also released a statement saying that the wishes of the average Burmese person would not be represented by a constitution based on the National Convention, since too many relevant groups had been excluded. On 19 July the United Nations secretary general Ban Ki-moon said that he was closely following the military's Convention and called for "inclusive political talks" in Burma.

## Red Cross condemns Burmese military

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) condemned the Burmese military in a rare and strongly worded statement issued on 29 June, for its abuses against civilians and its continued violation of humanitarian law. ICRC president Jakob Kellenberger said the actions of Burma's ruling junta were causing immense suffering: "The ICRC has repeatedly drawn attention to these abuses but the authorities have failed to put a stop to them." After conducting numerous interviews with civilians and prison inmates from across Burma, the ICRC said that they believed that thousands of prisoners had been sent to conflict zones and forced to act as porters, and that many of the porters are murdered or suffer from exhaustion or malnutrition.

"The practice known as 'portering' persists today despite numerous representations made by the ICRC ... It constitutes a major violation of various provisions of international humanitarian law," said Mr Kellenberger. The ICRC also blames the Burmese government for imposing, "increasingly severe restrictions" on the organisation's operations and said that the rules were making it impossible for the Red Cross to operate freely or distribute aid to the country's poorest areas.

## UK urged to quadruple aid to Burma

The UK House of Commons International Development Committee has called for in-country and cross-border aid to Burma to be quadrupled by 2013, saying that current assistance levels are "unacceptably low".

In a report released on 25 July, the committee called on the UK's Department for International Development to scale-up its assistance to displaced Burmese people and refugees and to increase its presence along the country's borders.

"Half a million people have been displaced from their homes in eastern Burma alone, and many are subject to widespread human rights abuses. A third of these people have been subjected to forced labour and rape is used as a weapon of war by the Burmese Army," the committee said in a statement. "Many of those uprooted from their homes flee to Burma's borders and depend on aid to survive. Yet Burma receives the lowest aid per head of all the world's poorest countries."

## UN Burma envoy visits Moscow

The UN Secretary General's Special Advisor on Burma, Mr Ibrahim Gambari reportedly arrived

in Moscow on 24 July for discussions with Russian president Mr Vladimir Putin on a number of issues including current conditions in Burma. Mr Gambari's trip follows visits to a number of Asian cities including Beijing, Tokyo and New Delhi as part of a fresh attempt by the UN to engage Burma's economic partners and regional neighbours in an international push for democratic reforms in the country. Mr Gambari's talks with Russian officials are expected to be the most challenging for the diplomat. Russia, along with China vetoed the first non-punitive UN Security Council resolution on Burma in January which disappointed many activists. Russian plans to help the Burmese military build their first nuclear research reactor are also likely to be on the agenda of talks between Mr Gambari and senior Kremlin officials.

## ASEAN – "has to take full responsibility for the state of Burma's situation"

On 23 July as Burma marked the 10-year anniversary of its membership in ASEAN, the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) said the regional grouping had failed to encourage democratization in Burma. AIPMC executive director Roshan Jason told the radio station, the *Democratic Voice of Burma* that while ASEAN had granted Burma membership in an attempt to win the ruling regime's trust, the grouping had failed to persuade the military to implement meaningful political reforms.

"Not only has there been a lack of change in democracy or any signs of democratization in Burma, there is also a lack of respect for human rights and the increasing abuse of human rights," Jason said. "ASEAN has to take full responsibility for the state of Burma's situation, the state of its people, economy and politics. They took ownership of the situation by allowing Burma to become a member," Jason said. Burma became a member of ASEAN along with Laos in 1997. (See also page one).

# SEVERE FLOODING HITS RANGOON

Thousands of residents in Rangoon and surrounding suburbs are homeless, following severe flooding caused by recent heavy rain. In some suburbs, the streets are knee-deep in water and residents have been unable to leave their homes.

The large extent of the flood's damage is blamed on the Yangon (Rangoon) City Development Council (YCDC) which has not spent its tax revenues on necessary infrastructure to prevent flooding, particularly in the new suburban and township districts. Up to a million people were relocated to the urban peripheries without any adequate infrastructure being provided, when the junta rebuilt the central area of Rangoon for the 'Year of Tourism' initiative in 1995-6. Residents, who have already been taxed for drainage works, say that no improvements are yet in place.

Flooding in urban areas is increasingly common. Mandalay suffered severe flooding in 2006. Large areas in other parts of Burma including Arakan,

Mon and Pegu divisions have also been affected by recent floods and residents complain that junta officials are ignoring their plight.



Recent flooding in Rangoon.



## NEXT STOPS FOR PHOTO EXHIBIT

*Burma, Forgotten Nation, Forgotten People* – an exhibition of photographs by Cork photographer, Philip Daly will be held in the following locations in the coming months. (Please check local press closer to the time for details):

### **Downpatrick: 6–11 August** –

Downpatrick Library Gallery, Market St, Downpatrick, (in conjunction with Amnesty Downpatrick group).

### **Kilkenny: 17–28 September** –

Kilkenny Castle, Kilkenny (in conjunction with the OPW).

### **Killarney: 1–20 October** –

Public Library, Rock Road, Killarney.

## AGM Report

The AGM of Burma Action Ireland took place on **Monday 11 June 2007**. Agenda items included reports from the Chairperson, Treasurer & Co-ordinator. Thanks were extended to a number of people including **Irish Aid**, BAI's members and to those who have given donations this last year. Thanks were also extended to BAI Honorary President, **John Boorman** for his support; the Loreto Sisters at St. Stephen's Green for use of their premises for meetings; Brosna Press in Co Offaly for their printing services at reduced rates; Siobhán O'Donoghue for her company's voluntary work on the BAI website; Oireachtas members and MEPs, including Ministers of State Conor Lenihan and Máire Hochtóir, Deputy Simon Coveney, and outgoing Senators Brendan Ryan and Paschal Mooney; photographer Philip Daly, Cork-based Janet Twomey and the BAI coordinator, Mary Montaut. The election of the officers also took place and the outcome was as follows: **Eileen Seymour** was re-elected Chairperson and was warmly thanked by the group for all her hard work; **Victor Dixon** was named Vice-Chairperson, the Treasurer is **Ray Mooney** and the Secretary is **Maria Keyes**.

## How you can help

Bordering Thailand and China, Burma, with a population of over 50 million, is ruled by a military regime called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The SPDC has been charged by the UN with 'crimes against humanity'. Burma has one of the highest levels of forced labour; more than 1,100 political prisoners; over 60% of its people living in poverty; rape is routinely used as a weapon of war and nearly half of the government budget is spent on military purposes.

### **Become a member of BAI**

BAI is always pleased to welcome new members. Please contact Mary Montaut at BAI (*number given below*) if you would like to speak to someone about joining the group. We are a small voluntary group.

### **Elected Representatives**

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 and/or MEP to let them know of your concern for human rights in Burma. Similarly a letter could also be sent to elected local TD's in your area and

to Seanad members. 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 and treatment of Burmese refugees in adjoining countries (*see front page article re situation in Malaysia and Thailand*).

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

Write appeals to the SPDC 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 Minister of State, Máire Hochtóir, TD and Deputy Joanna Tuffy, TD for the posting of this newsletter.

**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

