



Burma Action Ireland

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Newsletter

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UN fails to pass binding resolution on Burma

Burma solidarity groups including Burma Action Ireland, have expressed their regret that efforts to pass a binding resolution on Burma at a United Nations Security Council meeting on 12 January last have failed, because some nations chose to focus on the 'technicality' of whether Burma's problems should be handled by the UN Security Council, rather than on the intrinsic objective of the resolution which was in line with the fundamentals of the founding of the United Nations - to resolve problems peacefully in Burma.

Burma support groups had pinned much hope on this resolution being passed, which would have been a positive step in the quest for democracy in Burma – a country with one of the world's worst human rights records. The regime in Burma, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has consistently defied the United Nations, ignoring over a dozen calls for Aung San

Suu Kyi's release by the Secretary General, and 29 resolutions by the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Commission. In December, the European Parliament, recognising that the South East Asian nation was becoming a threat to international peace and security as well as a threat to its own population, had called on the United Nations Security Council to take this important step and to pass a binding resolution on Burma.

Burma's Government in Exile, based in the USA, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) issued a statement in January saying that it was: "Grateful to all nations that have voted in favour of a resolution by the United Nations Security Council which would have helped resolve the exacerbating political, socioeconomic, health, and narcotic problems in Burma". The NCGUB statement also said: "A UN Security Council resolution under *The Responsibility to Protect* could have

delivered practical protection for the people in Burma, particularly the ethnic nationalities, many of whom continue, to be victimised by those in power". The statement went on to say that in effect the vetoes in this instance if unintended, unfortunately mean that the Burmese generals can continue "persecuting pro-democracy elements and violating human rights".

The majority of the UN Security Council members - the United States, United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Italy, Slovakia, Peru, Panama and Ghana supported the resolution. China and Russia however exercised their veto powers to reject it. South Africa opposed the resolution, which came as a surprise to many solidarity groups, while Qatar, Indonesia, and Congo abstained. Russia and China are both significant arms suppliers to the Burmese regime, as well as seeking investment opportunities in Burma's large-scale gas reserves.

NOBEL PEACE LAUREATES REFUSED VISAS



Aung San Suu Kyi – Nobel Laureates want to use their liberty to promote hers.

On the 5 January, 13 Nobel Peace prize-winners applied for visas at Burmese embassies in the USA, UK and several other countries. They were taking part in a new initiative to travel to Burma to support the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, herself a Nobel Peace prize-winner (1991). The move was part of a demonstration by the *Nobel Women's Initiative* to support their call for the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to debate Burma and to call for the immediate release of their fellow-laureate. In Washington DC, Dr Shirin Ebadi and Professor Jody Williams were prevented from submitting visa applications when the Burmese embassy refused them entry. In Seoul, South Korea's former President, Kim Dae-jung received

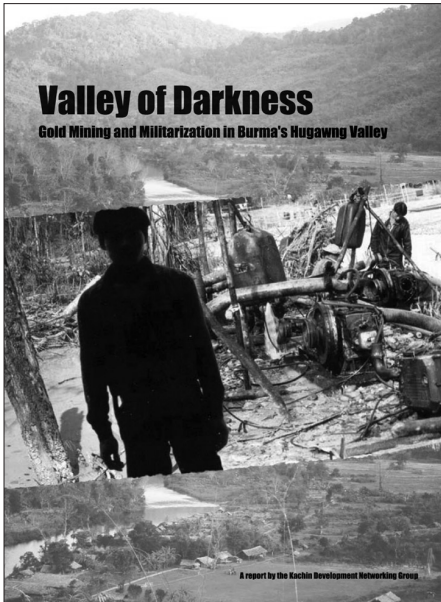
similar treatment from the Burmese embassy there.

Among the Nobel Peace Laureates who took part in the initiative were Irishwomen, Betty Williams and Mairéad Corrigan, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. The Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and Lech Walesa also tried to submit applications and were unsuccessful.

At a demonstration in front of the Burmese embassy in Washington, Professor Jody Williams stated: "As the elected leader of the Burmese people, we have to ensure Suu Kyi's voice reaches beyond the walls that confine her. When I visited her in 2003 she asked that we use our liberty to promote hers and that's what we're trying to do."



GOVERNMENT DEVELOPMENT MENACES KACHIN STATE



Valley of Darkness, a new report by the Kachin Development Networking Group.

A new report has indicated that the formerly unspoiled forests and waterways of the Hugawng Valley, located in Kachin State in the north-east of Burma and renowned as an important tiger reserve, have been ravaged by extensive gold mining. The mining projects are being promoted by Burma's military government. The report - **Valley of Darkness**, was launched in January by the Kachin Development Working Group and is based on undercover research. It reveals that the military government has expanded military control of the valley and sold off tracts as mining concessions. Mechanised pumps and dredges, dumping mercury-contaminated tailings are used by workers located in over 100 hydraulic and pit mines. It seems that thousands of workers are employed in hazardous conditions. The report can be accessed on www.burmaactionireland.org. In addition, the state-sponsored *New Light of Myanmar* newspaper has reported the signing of an agreement between the military junta's hydro-power department and the China Power Investment Corporation to build two major dams in Kachin State. One dam generating 2,000 megawatts of electricity is to be sited on the Mayka River. The other, producing 3,600 at its confluence with the Irrawaddy River. The report does not indicate whether the

power obtained will supply the Kachin State or China. This signing is the latest in a number of agreements Burma has arranged with other countries with the aim of exploiting its natural resources. The Salween River, one of the great rivers of Southeast Asia, is under threat. The governments of the Salween countries: Burma, Thailand and

China have been pushing forward with plans to dam the river. If the three-country partnership is successful, it will destroy vast tracts of tribal homelands rich in biodiversity. For more details about the Salween project and to sign an on-line petition to save the river, see www.salweenwatch.org

Awards for Daw Suu Kyi, Lian H Sakhong and Charm Tong



Prize-winner Charm Tong will receive her award on 23 February 2007.

Irish connections

Aung San Suu Kyi has been honoured as the first recipient of the **Netaji Subhas Award**, established by the foundation that bears the Indian nationalist leader's name. The award is for Daw Suu Kyi's: "outstanding contribution to the struggle for restoring democracy in her country". The General Secretary of the All-India Forward Bloc wrote to her to announce the foundation's decision. As Daw Suu Kyi is under house arrest in Burma, she will not be in a position to personally receive the award and leaders of the National League for Democracy will accept it in India on her behalf. Daw Suu Kyi has won numerous awards and in Ireland, she is both a Freewoman of Dublin (2000) and a Freewoman of Galway (2005).

Meanwhile in Trondheim, the **Norwegian Students Peace Prize** for 2007 is to be awarded to 25-year-old Burmese teacher, activist and student Charm Tong. Charm Tong, who attended the Irish organisation Front

Line's platform for human rights defenders event in 2005, will receive the prize in recognition for her work to promote democracy in Burma. The prize will be awarded on 23 February during the International Student Festival in Trondheim. **Charm Tong** is described as one of the most influential activists in the exile opposition movement in Burma.

Dr Lian H Sakhong, a prominent ethnic Chin pro-democracy activist, was named this year's recipient of the **Martin Luther King, Jr prize**. Martin Luther King promoted non-violent means to achieve civil rights reform and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his efforts. The award to Dr Sakhong was presented in Sweden on 15 January. Lian H Sakhong is the secretary general of three organisations: the Ethnic Nationalities Council, the Chin National League for Democracy and the United Nationalities League for Democracy. He also serves as Research Director for the National Reconciliation Programme. He was frequently detained by Burma's military government before he fled the country in 1990 to settle in Sweden. Dr Lian Sakhong has also visited Ireland and was a participant in the Institute of Public Administration and Department of Foreign Affairs Dublin-based training programme on conflict resolution and negotiation skills.



Update on Burma

Rohingyas arrested in Thailand

Thirty-seven Rohingyas from Burma have been arrested off the coast of Thailand. The group were trying to enter Thailand illegally and are the latest in a number of Rohingya arrivals in the past two months. They were intercepted by Thailand's coast guard. The group are reported to be from Maungdaw township in Burma's western Arakan State. Burma's Muslim Rohingyas say they are a distinct ethnic group, which has inhabited areas of Arakan state since the seventh century. Many political groups do not accept this and believe the Rohingyas are the descendants of South Asian immigrants who arrived in the area much later. As a result, the Rohingya population inside Burma suffers mistreatment at the hands of the Burmese military. Many are refused Burmese citizenship, identification cards and marriage licences and are prevented from travelling to neighbouring areas. Many seek a new life in Thailand.

Burma's state press accuses Daw Suu of tax evasion

In a message which might prove confusing and misleading to those unfamiliar with the true state of affairs in Burma, Burma's state media, run by the military government, have accused Aung San Suu Kyi of 'evading tax' by spending the money from her international awards overseas. On 18 January, the military's *New Light of Myanmar* newspaper, said the pro-democracy leader and 1991 Nobel prize winner was 'lucky' to remain under house arrest, instead of in prison. "She avoided paying taxes to the State by asking her family members abroad to spend all her cash awards provided by international organisations and honorariums ... instead of spending the money in the country," the *New Light of Myanmar* said. "It was very considerate of the government to put only restriction on her; instead of punishing her in accordance with law for the acts she had committed," the paper said. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has spent 11 of the past 17 years in detention in Burma and remains under house arrest (and therefore unable to personally manage her fiscal arrangements, leaving them instead in the capable hands of family members abroad). She has received a number of international awards (see page two) recognising her non-violent contribution to the democracy movement in Burma.

Justice Restorers

A group of 30 Burmese law students, called the *Justice Restorers*, have asked Burma's military regime, the State Peace and Development Council, to allow democratic political change in Burma. The justice group also called on greater rights for ethnic groups and for the management of Burma to be returned to the people. "Burma should be free from using violent ways to solve national political matters, and permanent peace should be guaranteed by using peaceful means to solve problems," they said. "The government

should be an organisation that follows the laws passed by the citizens." Founded on 17 December 2006, the *Justice Restorers* also said they would continue to speak out against the ruling Burmese military and that they would encourage the public to do the same. "We, the citizens of Burma and organisations that support democracy have to keep calling in order to achieve a democratic nation".

Prayer campaigners beaten at Shwedagon pagoda



Prayer campaigners beaten at Shwedagon pagoda.

A group of people attending a regular prayer vigil at Shwedagon pagoda in Rangoon were beaten by special police. The group's vigil was in honour of Burma's political prisoners. Ko Than Zaw Myint, who was at the prayer meeting told the radio station the Democratic Voice of Burma, that he was grabbed and assaulted by three men. The Head of the military-run Shwedagon pagoda police alleged there were no scuffles at the pagoda and that officers were carrying out their 'normal duties'.

European Commission allocates €15.5 million in humanitarian aid for Burma

The Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Mr Louis Michel, has announced €15.5 million in aid from the European Commission, to help vulnerable groups and refugees on the Burma-Thailand border and inside Burma. The aid will be directed towards the health, nutrition and water/sanitation needs of over 150,000 people in refugee camps. Protection for vulnerable populations inside Burma is to be delivered via the International Red Cross. In announcing the aid allocation, Commissioner Michel said that: "Some regions of Burma/Myanmar are the scenarios of silent humanitarian crises, with many groups living in extremely vulnerable conditions.

The Commission is firmly committed to providing humanitarian support to this forgotten crisis."

Burma has an under-five child mortality rate of 108 per 1,000 live births, triple the figure of neighbouring Thailand. The main causes of premature death are malaria, HIV/AIDS, acute respiratory infections and diarrhoeal diseases. Water and sanitation problems are also of particular concern: water-borne illnesses account for 50% of morbidity among young children, and, according to UNICEF, diarrhoea is the second most common cause of mortality among children under five.

For more information on health in Burma see http://ec.europa.eu/echo/field/myanmar/index_en.htm

OPEN HEART CAMPAIGN

On 4 January last, Independence Day, the 59th anniversary of Burma's emancipation from Britain, an 'Open Heart' campaign was launched by the '88 Generation Students.

These students were involved (and survived) what was initially a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration in Burma on 8 August 1988. The demonstrators were asking for basic human rights and were attacked as they walked by the military regime. Thousands of people were killed on the streets of Rangoon. The '88 group now aims, through a letter writing initiative, to encourage Burmese citizens to voice their dissatisfaction with the ongoing military rule.

At the launch of the campaign, the group said: "The absence of foreign dominance and colonial rule does not make us truly free and independent. We need to be free from any system that deprives us from enjoying life ... any system that is oppressive and repressive". Speaking about the operation of the campaign, organiser Ko Mya Aye said: "Our main work is to send out envelopes which are already pre-addressed and have at the lower part, the writing, 'mailed via the '88 Generation Students'. In the envelopes are two letters. One letter is our appeal to the people, asking them to write about the problems they are encountering every day. Another letter is just a blank sheet of paper, and people are asked to write about what they are feeling on that sheet," he said. Ko Mya Aye said letters were already coming back to the group complaining about issues ranging from electricity shortages to the detention of political prisoners. The letters gathered will be forwarded by 4 February to Burma's senior general, Than Shwe. The military leader, who recently spent two weeks in a Singapore hospital, appeared on state-run TV on 16 January last to dispel a rumour that he was seriously ill.



Ban Ki Moon calls on Burma's military to release all political prisoners

The United Nations new Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon has called for the release of Burma's political prisoners, including democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The announcement came on foot of the recent release by the military regime of some of the country's political detainees. A statement read in New York on 8 January by a spokesperson said:

"The Secretary-General has taken note of the decision by the Government of Myanmar (Burma) on 3 January 2007 to grant amnesty to 2,831 prisoners. He welcomes reports that this includes the release of up to 40 political prisoners. The Secretary-General urges the Myanmar authorities to go beyond this first

step by releasing all other political prisoners in the country, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and by making further concrete progress on all of the issues raised in the context of his good offices."

The statement is the latest UN effort to secure the release of Daw Suu Kyi and follows a four-day visit to Burma in November by Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Ibrahim Gambari. Mr Gambari had also called for the release of political prisoners, as well as for Burma to open up its political process and take "concrete steps" to address other areas of global concern, including hostilities against minorities.



Ban Ki Moon wants freedom for Aung San Suu Kyi.

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 (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. 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, (as Mr Ban Ki Moon has – see top of this page).
- Express your opposition to the use of torture in prisons, the growing AIDS/ health crisis and the exploitation of natural resources in the country.

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

Write appeals to 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 human rights including 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 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

