



Burmese regime leading the country “downhill on all fronts”

The UK, US and French Foreign Ministers have issued a joint statement calling for urgent progress towards democracy in Burma and improved human rights. The UK's **David Miliband**, US secretary of state, **Condoleezza Rice** and **Bernard Kouchner** of France signed the statement on Burma, which was released at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos on 25 January 2008. **Aung San Suu Kyi** has also said she is dissatisfied with the progress of her reconciliation talks with the junta, and cautioned the public to "hope for the best and prepare for the worst."

The Ministers said that their decision to write about Burma reflected their countries' strong support for the Burmese people in their struggle for democracy. "We have repeatedly made clear that the situation in Burma cannot continue, and that we remain totally committed to helping the people of Burma," they said.

"We cannot afford to forget. We must convince the Burmese regime to meet the demands of the international community and respect the basic rights of Burma's people."

The three Foreign Ministers said the Burmese government had met none of the recent demands of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The UNSC has called for the release of political prisoners in the country, steps towards genuine dialogue, full cooperation with the UN and efforts to address human rights and humanitarian issues.

The statement also expressed concern that the Burmese regime's own roadmap for transition is open-ended and excludes key opposition figures. The Foreign Ministers urged other countries to unite and show their support for the Burmese people. "We call on all those attending the World Economic Forum to demonstrate that, while the regime may be indifferent to the suffering of the Burmese people, the world is not. A unified call for genuine and peaceful political reconciliation and reform will be heard in Burma."

In addition to the statement from the Foreign Ministers, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia, **Scot Marciel**, said (22 January) that the Burmese regime was leading the country "downhill on all fronts" and called for greater pressure on the junta. He said: "In October, the Security Council called on the regime to release political prisoners and improve human rights after a military crackdown on peaceful protests in September, when civilians and Buddhist monks were beaten and arrested after pro-democracy demonstrations following a sharp fuel price hike. The government said ten were killed, but diplomats and dissidents put the toll much higher."

In relation to the military, Mr Marciel said: "They've got no popular support, no legitimacy and, frankly, not very many good ideas. Our belief is that if they hear consistently from the international

community - from everybody - that they need to move, then that gives us the best progress."

According to an NLD spokesperson, Aung San Suu Kyi is frustrated at the government's refusal to set a timeframe for reforms and at the junta's stance that political change should wait until the so-called roadmap to democracy is completed. Many observers believe that Aung San Suu Kyi's talks with the regime's liaison officer, Aung Kyi, are meaningless and are a merely a show of goodwill to ease international pressure on the regime. On 9 February the junta announced that it would hold a referendum on a new constitution in May and general elections in 2010.

CHINA

China is one of Burma's biggest trading partners and closest diplomatic allies. Other nations have repeatedly expressed hope that Beijing would leverage those ties to press the junta to open a dialogue with the opposition. Beijing has shown little willingness to do so, although in October, China joined other Security Council

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Up to 400 children under five die every day in Burma

At a briefing in January on UNICEF's annual report on "The State of the World's Children", **Dr Osamu Kunii**, a nutrition expert who works for the United Nations in Burma, said that deaths among Burma's under-fives reach between 10,000 and 15,000 a year or between 270 and 400 every day. Although between 1990 and 2006 its child mortality rate fell by 1.6%, it is still the worst in the whole of Asia except for Afghanistan. About 21% of Burmese children succumb to acute respiratory infection; the rest mainly to pneumonia, diarrhoea, septicaemia and other preventable diseases.

Across all age groups, tens of thousands of people in Burma die each year from malaria, tuberculosis, AIDS, dysentery, diarrhoea and other illnesses.

Most of Burma's health care is funded by international sources, with the government spending only about 3% on health annually, compared with 40% on the military, according to a report published this year by researchers from the University of California, Berkeley and Johns Hopkins University.

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KAREN REFUGEES FIND A NEW HOME IN MAYO

Under the **UN Refugee Resettlement Scheme**, the **Irish Government** has accepted over a hundred Karen refugees from camps on the Burma-Thailand border. The refugees are based in County Mayo where as part of their integration, they have been facilitated with a two month orientation course as they face the challenge of adapting to their new life in Ireland. Many of the refugees have little or no English and some have spent long years of struggle and deprivation on the move away from the Burmese army and subsequently in refugee camps on the border. Even in camps, they may have suffered further attacks by the Burmese army which does not scruple to make incursions into Thai territory.

Meitheal Mhaigheo, the area based partnership company for County Mayo and the **Mayo Intercultural Action Group** have established a mentoring programme to assist and support the Karen people. Very recently Burma Action Ireland had the opportunity to exhibit the Philip

Daly photographic collection, 'Burma – Forgotten Nation, Forgotten People,' at public libraries in both Castlebar and Ballina.

Ireland receives refugees each year under this UN resettlement scheme and is one of 18 countries and one of only six EU member states which participate in the programme.

BAI's Mary Montaut speaking at the opening of the photographic exhibition, Burma Forgotten Nation, Forgotten People in Ballina, Co Mayo.



BAI marks International Human Rights Day

On Monday 10 December 2007, Burma Action Ireland held a Ceremony of Reflection, to mark International Human Rights day and the 16th anniversary of the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Aung San Suu Kyi. The ceremony also remembered Buddhist Monks and civilians who were killed during the recent crackdown in the country by the Burmese military dictatorship. The Ceremony of Reflection involved music

and poetry, and included contributions from saxophonist **Keith Donald** (of 'Moving Hearts'), composer and arranger **Fiachra Trench**, the poet, writer and member of both Aosdána and the Arts Council, **Theo Dorgan** and film-maker **John Boorman**. BAI's **Professor Victor Dixon** and **Aung San Phy** as well as Phy's Irish-Burmese daughters also made contributions to the ceremony in addition to **Margaret**

Groome, from the Theravada Buddhist Study Group and **Dr John D'Arcy May**, Chairman of the European Buddhist-Christian Network. BAI is very grateful to all those who attended and participated in the evening event. BAI would also like to thank the clergy at St Teresa's Church, Clarendon Street, Dublin 2.

Where are the monks?

There is concern for the whereabouts of Buddhist monks in Burma who were very visible during the prodemocracy demonstrations held in the country last September. It has been reported in the February edition of the Asia-journal *The Irrawaddy*, that monks who walked together in protest at that time, were forcibly disrobed by junta operatives, sent back to their monasteries and are now finding themselves "under constant surveillance from authorities". However monks are still continuing to quietly protest in so far as is possible; some monasteries are refusing alms from the military, and a new phenomenon is reported at some pagodas – with the numbers congregating together to attend sermons much higher than before the 'Saffron Revolution.' This move is seen as an expression of solidarity with the monks and a further demonstration of the people's longing for democratic reform.

According to **U Bo Hla Tint** – National League for Democracy (NLD) MP elect, who delivered a recent address at the Peace Institute at the John Hopkins University, the demonstrations resulted in the killing of approximately 200 demonstrators and 3,000 arrests (including about 1,400 monks and nuns and more than 200 NLD members). Final figures are not known. U Bo Hla Tint has said that the: "undercurrent of dissent is still very much alive in Burma and opposition against the junta has become deep rooted in the minds of the people".

Naing Ko Ko, a postgraduate scholarship student in International Relations at Auckland University, New Zealand, and a former political prisoner in Burma told the radio station the *Democratic Voice of Burma* that: "It is no exaggeration to say that millions of people in Burma are

brutally oppressed by the current military thugs. Thousands of respected Buddhist monks have been disrobed and locked up by the military junta. Burmese people have emigrated to hunt for dirty jobs on low incomes in neighbouring countries, especially in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. An estimated one million internally displaced persons of ethnic nationalities are running away from persecution and atrocities by Burma army personnel. Now, following the 'Saffron Revolution', it is time to work hard to achieve winning strategies and develop results-oriented approaches for what the people of Burma need: peace, democracy, justice and national reconciliation."



A monk in the streets of Rangoon during the pro-democracy protest or 'Saffron Revolution' 2007.



Update on Burma

Thai authorities arrest 300 illegal Burmese migrants

According to the radio station the *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 300 illegal Burmese migrant workers were arrested by Thai immigration on 30 January in a raid on a garment factory in Bangkok. Thai immigration conducted a surprise raid on Lai Ling garment factory in Mahachai district, which employs around 2,000 Burmese migrants. Ko Khine Zaw Linn, a Burmese migrant worker at the factory, said that many of the workers tried to flee the factory when the authorities arrived. "First they blocked all the exits including the fire escape around the back of the factory to stop us escaping. Some people hurt themselves jumping from high floors in a desperate attempt to flee the factory". Most of the workers had no proper legal documentation, while others had Thai labour cards but had not extended their registration in 2007. U Kyaw Thuang, coordinator of the Mae Sot-based Yaung Chi Oo Burmese migrants' association, said that many Burmese migrants were still entering Thailand, despite the ongoing crackdown on illegal immigrants. "They come to Thailand despite knowing about the situation here because they cannot earn enough money in Burma to make a living," said Kyaw Thuang. "The State Peace and Development Council's mismanagement of Burma has turned the country into a factory making slaves for its neighbouring countries."

UN secretary-general urges more action on child soldiers

The United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon has urged further measures to combat military recruitment of children, which he says continues to take place in more than 12 countries around the world including Burma. In a report submitted to the UN Security Council on 30 January, the secretary-general recommended that the Council consider bans on military aid and travel restrictions targeted at those who systematically exploit children in armed conflict. The Burmese regime continues to deny the prevalence of child recruitment in the country. In an article in the Burmese state media in January, the Chair of the Government's Committee for

Prevention against Recruiting Minors into Army, major-general Thura Myint Aung, said there had been "only very few cases of recruiting minors". Thura Myint Aung claimed that laws against the practice, combined with workshops on prevention and supervision by the committee to ensure compliance, had reduced incidences of child recruitment.

Rambo movie inspiring real life regime opponents

The Hollywood star Sylvester Stallone has told the Asia-based journal *The Irrawaddy*, that his latest "Rambo" movie, (filmed close to the Thai-Burma border) and its tagline are inspiring real-life opponents of Burma's ruling military junta - and prompting a government backlash. "Either live for something, die for nothing; it's your choice," Stallone reportedly said to the journal in an interview to promote the film. "Students have now used this film as a rallying point and are using this tagline quote, thinking maybe the American military will intervene and save them," he said. The film, the fourth in the "Rambo" series, has a Vietnam War veteran - played by Mr Stallone - trying to find missionaries captured by Burma soldiers. The film has yet to be formally released in Asia.

Mirrors and magnifying glasses

Burma's censorship authorities have found new tools to monitor submitted written manuscripts before approval - mirrors and magnifying glasses. Rangoon-based writers told *The Irrawaddy* journal that censors working in the Press Scrutiny and Registration Board office are now equipped with mirrors and magnifying glasses to help them seek out hidden messages in poems, novels, stories and advertisements.

The new tools were introduced following the discovery in a published poem of a clandestine message mocking junta leader Snr-Gen Than Shwe. The first words of each line of the short poem, written by Saw Wai under the title "February 14" and published in the weekly "Love Journal," made up the message: "Senior General Than Shwe is foolish with power." Saw Wai was subsequently arrested.

THE LADY OF BURMA: AUNG SAN SUU KYI "ON STAGE" IN IRELAND

Preview by Victor Dixon, Burma Action Ireland

Admirers of the Nobel Prizewinner and Freewoman of both Dublin and Galway, and all who would like more insight into Aung San Suu Kyi's story, should on no account fail to see *The Lady of Burma* at one of its four performances soon in Ireland: 30 April at the Hawk's Well, Sligo, 1 May at the Island Arts Centre, Lisburn, and 2 & 3 May at the Helix in Glasnevin, Dublin. Its accomplished dramatist-director, Richard Shannon, researched his play in Burma on a bursary from Britain's Arts Council, and developed it in Belfast. Acclaimed at its premiere at the Old Vic, it was positively received at the Edinburgh Festival, during a four-week season at London's Riverside Studios, and in January at the Oxford Playhouse, at the start of its present tour. An hour-long monologue, powerfully performed (with minimal scenery and props but a highly evocative sound-track) by actor Liana Mau Tan Gould, portrays Suu Kyi recalling the main events of her life when incarcerated in Rangoon's Insein jail. The horrors she has experienced are not minimized, but the play is by no means dispiriting; indeed one cannot but be inspired not only by her passion and resilience but by her unflinching sense of humour.

At the Helix, BAI is planning an addition to the show; watch our website.

www.burmaactionireland.org

Theatre details: Sligo: T: 071 916 1518,

W: www.hawkswell.com

Lisburn: T: 0044 2892 50924,

W: www.islandartscentre.com;

Dublin T: 01 700 7000, W: www.thehelix.ie

Burmese regime leading the country "downhill on all fronts" (Cont from page 1)

members in calling on the regime to release political prisoners and improve human rights. Washington has placed economic sanctions on Burma that include a complete ban on the import of the country's products and the freezing of some junta officials' financial assets in US territories. China, however, has moved to step up economic links, including the development of natural gas deposits in the Bay of Bengal. In December 2007, China National Petroleum Corp., the country's biggest oil and gas producer, took a further step toward

building a pipeline to transport oil from Burma's western port of Sittwe to the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan. Responding to Scot Marciel's call for increased pressure on the Burmese junta, China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman **Jiang Yu** said China wanted to see stability, democracy and development in the country. However, Jiang urged the international community to be "objective when viewing the Myanmar situation... and provide constructive assistance." China objects to Western criticisms of the

military regime, claiming that conditions in Burma have improved dramatically since the violent crackdown on peaceful protests in September. "I don't think sanctions are helpful," Jiang told reporters in January. Also in early January, the UN Security Council said its envoy, **Ibrahim Gambari**, should return to Burma to help push for national reconciliation. Mr Gambari wanted to visit in January but has received a letter from Burma's military government requesting that he comes now in April.



Book Review: The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma

Thant Myint (2006). ISBN 978-0-571-21755-7 (£20.00 stg)

The author of this new book about Burmese history is the grandson of U Thant, (UN Secretary-General 1961-71) and has served the UN in Peacekeeping Operations in Cambodia and (the former) Yugoslavia. Although he has never resided in Burma, he was visiting at the time of the Uprisings in the country in 1988 and the book reflects the subsequent course of his thinking about Burma. In the Introduction, he explains how this has shifted from fierce democratic determination to oust the military junta, towards a less optimistic, almost tentative hope that meaningful dialogue could be established. The loss of his more youthful energy seems rather sad, and of course there is no reason to consider that it reflects a gain in realism; more likely it shows the cumulative effect of the disappointments which the Burmese military junta inflicts continually on the international community.

Thant's strategy in presenting 'histories of Burma' reflects this subdued, even chastened, quality in the book. In a very sophisticated, western way, he goes right back to pre-history in order to paint a highly complex picture of the many cultures, historical influences and events, in an effort to make the 'Debate' about Burma less black-and-white. The 'histories' of the title turn out to be extremely varied; folklore, anecdotes, colonial narratives, reflections upon recent archaeological hypotheses. The flaw in this procedure is that it undermines (as he perhaps intended) the sense of a clear view. Instead he raises all sorts of different questions, turning the reader's attention from this fragment to that, in a way which is cumulatively rather confusing. The book's lack of an index is a shortcoming too.

The book concludes with a 'Palimpsest' (something written over many

times) in which he expresses his feeling that the most important thing for Burma now is to end the isolation which was imposed on the country by General Ne Win, and which has largely continued. However this places him in the uncomfortable position of having to acknowledge the present dictatorship's aim, stated by an army captain: "What we really want is to change from being an isolated left-wing military dictatorship, to a pro-American, right-wing military dictatorship." Thant Myint-U rightly deplores this, but is left impotently blaming the West for isolating Burma, when it is clear that in fact the Burmese military junta is still depriving the country of meaningful contact with the rest of the world. *Reviewed by Mary Montaut.*

St Patrick's Day Card -

Show the regime that Ireland is watching

Enclosed in this edition of the newsletter is a postcard addressed to Aung San Suu Kyi marking the feast of St Patrick. BAI would be pleased if you could send this card to her. All it needs is your signature and a stamp valued at 78 cent or if you are posting it after 3 March, 82 cent. Monks protesting in Dublin and Burma are featured on the card's cover. Aung San Suu Kyi's high profile is one of the things that has kept her alive. The cards maybe intercepted by the regime, but the generals will know that the world is watching and trying to make contact with her, and that will help to keep her safe.

How you can help

Bordering Thailand and China, Burma, with a population of 53 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; 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.

Elected Representatives

Write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dermot Ahern, TD (Iveagh House, 80 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2), thanking him for his concern to date with the situation in Burma and urge him to continue raising 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, the child mortality rate (see page one) and treatment of Burmese refugees in adjoining countries.

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 including Buddhist monks (See page two). 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 Thein Sein,
Prime Minister,
State Peace and Development Council,
Naypyitaw,
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 Hackett, 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

