



Burma Action Ireland

Spring 2008

Newsletter

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NEW 'SHAM' CONSTITUTION ENSHRINES MILITARY RULE

On Saturday 9 February 2008 the Burmese junta, the State Peace and Development Council, announced that it would hold a referendum on a new constitution on 10 May next, and general elections in the country in 2010.

The referendum will be the first balloting in Burma since 1990, when the National League for Democracy party (NLD) led by its General Secretary, Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory that was never recognised by the junta.

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) claims that it is trying to establish a 'disciplined democracy' and as part of its road map to democracy, convened a National Convention to draw up guidelines for a new constitution in 1993. However, the SPDC constitution drafting process was not inclusive, neither was it democratic in content nor in process. Excluded from the drafting process were many of the 1990 election winning parties including the National League for Democracy that won over 80% of the seats. The draft constitution - completed on 19 February but not made public until April - enshrines military rule, giving 25% of the seats to the Burmese military. It also gives the military effective veto power over decisions made by Parliament. The terms of the constitution, also exclude detained opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from running for office, due to her marriage to 'a foreigner', the late Michael Aris. Burmese opposition groups, foreign governments and international organisations have denounced the planned referendum. Pro-democracy activists have called on the Burmese people to vote against the constitution, with some advocating sabotage or a boycott of the referendum, while the military government has been widely campaigning for a "Yes" vote.

In a statement issued by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, (NCGUB), **Dr Sein Win, Prime Minister in Exile** and cousin of Aung San Suu Kyi, said: "The headlong decision by the military regime to hold a national referendum in May is a knee-jerk reaction to the growing problems the Burmese generals are facing.

The regime, as the Burmese would say, is "a mad man surrounded by fire" and since it is plagued by economic woes, increasing international pressure and widening public discontent at home, it has impulsively decided to convene a national referendum to overcome the problems."

He added: "We do not endorse the state constitution in its present form and the people will never ratify it. But the Burmese generals are probably already taking steps to ensure that they get the results they want from the referendum."

Eileen Seymour, Chairperson of Burma Action Ireland, said: "The regime has yet to enter into genuine dialogue with the National League for Democracy and Aung San Suu Kyi. It lost the election in 1990 to Daw Suu Kyi, and ignored that result." Ms Seymour added: "There are serious concerns about the referendum, including voter eligibility. Many people, including internally displaced peoples (IDPs), monks and other religious groups are not allowed to vote in the referendum yet it is reported that others have obtained multiple national registration cards. It is also illegal to criticise the draft constitution, an act which is punishable by up to 20 years in jail."

The NCGUB believes that it is imperative for the international community to oppose the military-sponsored constitution and the regime's referendum plan. The organization has said that there needs to be "an inclusive process which will determine the political future of the country and which also includes all political parties, including the National League

for Democracy and other ethnic nationality forces." They also say: "It is time for the international community to give, through the UN Security Council, a stronger mandate to the UN Secretary-General's Office and enable it to play an effective mediatory role in bringing about an equitable solution to the political deadlock in Burma."



Burma's military regime is planning a referendum on 10 May next.

The Lady of Burma: Final stop-press news

Personal and political have rarely been so ferociously connected... Gould delivers with incendiary force. The Times.

Richard Shannon's inspiring play, in which Liana Mau Tan Gould portrays **Aung San Suu Kyi** recalling her life, is now to have **six** performances in Ireland, between Tuesday 29 April and Sunday 4 May. The dates are as follows: at the **Belltable in Limerick on Tuesday 29 April**, the **Hawk's Well Theatre in Sligo on Wednesday 30 April**, the **Island Arts Centre in Lisburn on Thursday 1 May**, the **Helix in Glasnevin, Dublin on Friday 2 and Saturday 3 May**, and also as part of the Cathedral Chapter Arts Festival - at the Northern Bank Building, **Belfast, on Sunday 4 May** (at 6pm).

At the Helix, the Saturday performance on 3 May will be followed by a discussion chaired by BAI Honorary President, film maker John Boorman, director of 'Beyond Rangoon'. The speakers will be: Richard Shannon, the play's author-director; Senator David Norris, known for his stand on human rights; Niamh de Loughry, who has worked with Burmese refugees in Thailand and is helping those now settling in County Mayo; and Zoya Phan, a Burmese activist who deeply moved those who attended the premiere of *The Lady of Burma* at London's Old Vic Theatre last year.

Please check local press or the websites below for start times and booking line numbers.

- www.belltable.ie
- www.hawkswell.com
- www.thehelix.ie
- www.islandartscentre.com
- www.cqaf.com; www.ladyofburma.com



Ms Liana Mau Tan Gould as Aung San Suu Kyi in the *Lady of Burma*.



REFUGEES FROM BURMA VICTIMIZED ABROAD

Getting out of Burma is not for many an escape to happiness. In Malaysian cities like Kuala Lumpur, Burmese migrants (including some with UNHCR documentation or legal work-permits) are increasingly being taken to police or immigration by groups of volunteers authorized to arrest them, who are paid, according to one migrant who spoke to the radio station the *Democratic Voice of Burma*, "80 ringgit for illegals". Speaking to the Station, he said: "They arrested about 500 migrants in three raids last week, and another 500 more recently." As a result, another said, Malaysian employers are now refusing to take on Burmese (people); they are left penniless, and forced to hide in the jungle with no proper food.

Very recently in Thailand, a group of Burmese, mainly women, who had made an illegal overnight crossing from Victoria's Point, set out from Ranong province in an airtight shrimp lorry on a 285-mile journey to the southern resort of Phuket, for which each paid 10,000 baht (€200). The aim of their trip was to find work and a new life. But though some hammered on the walls of the lorry to alert the driver, 54 died of suffocation. The survivors were arrested (on 10 April). Most were sentenced to three days in prison and faced deportation back to Burma.

Victims of another kind in Thailand are Karenni women who have extended their necks, by a centuries-old tradition of wearing an increasing number of brass rings. In Nai Soi, Thailand, some fifty women who pose for photographs and sell souvenirs to 10,000 tourists a year, earn the village head, he admits, up to €3,000 a month. They and their families are given basic food, and are paid €30 per set of neck-rings, though they claim not to have received this for five months. (Source, Thailand: *The Times*).

The Thai authorities have been pressurised internationally to allow 20 Karenni to take up opportunities of resettlement abroad. However, these women are so lucrative a source of income that the government of Hong Son province refuses to provide them with



Tourist attraction – a Karenni woman who has extended her neck in a centuries-old tradition.

exit visas. One is Mu Lon. In 2006 she and her sister were ready to go, formally invited by the New Zealand government, but their places were given away. Last year, two women moved to a rival attraction near Chiang Mai, but were arrested by police and returned to their servitude.

Report on 'Open Hearts' Letter Campaign

On 8 April last, the '88 **Generation Students**, survivors of the 1988 massacre in Burma which sparked Burma's pro-democracy movement, reported on their 'Open Hearts' campaign, launched last year on their nation's Independence Day, 4 January. In this 2007 campaign they encouraged people living in Burma to write letters about their grievances. Initially, the group had intended to send any correspondence received to the military dictatorship's leader. But instead, to protect

their correspondents from retaliation, they decided to publish a summary report on the 2,649 letters they had received. In relation to letter content, 54% of letters spoke about health, education, economic and social matters; approximately 20% about politics; 13% on human rights abuses; and 8% about charges of corruption. Included in the report are 254 sample cases, covering a wide range of issues, including forced labour, land seizures, unlawful detention and religious

and racial discrimination.

Praising those who had written for their bravery in speaking out, the Generation's leader, Ko Soe Htun, said that their aim in undertaking the initiative had been "to document abuses by the government in order to educate and inform the authorities... who do not recognise their legal and moral responsibility", and also "to raise awareness in the world of the human rights abuse and political, social and economic woes Burma is facing."



Peace Prize recipients call for Arms Embargo

On 19 February last, nine Nobel Peace Prize recipients – including the 1976 recipients Máiréad Maguire and Betty Williams - released a statement calling for the international community and the United Nations Security Council to impose arms embargoes on Burma. The move comes after the country's ruling military regime carried out a crackdown on demonstrating Buddhist monks and civilians in Autumn 2007.

The statement says: "We appeal to the members of the Security Council, and the international community, to take action quickly on measures that will prevent the sale of arms to the Burmese military, including a ban on banking transactions targeting top Burmese leaders, as well as state and private entities that support the government's weapons trade."

The statement was issued by Archbishop Desmond M Tutu and signed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Shirin Ebadi, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Rigoberta Menchu Tum, Prof. Elie Wiesel and Jody Williams – in addition to Máiréad Maguire and Betty Williams.

According to the arms sales monitoring organisation, the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, China is the leading supplier of arms to Burma's military regime. Others include Ukraine, Poland, India and Russia.

Also according to a 3 April report from *Reuters*, North Korea has been selling multiple rocket launchers to Burma since the two countries restored ties last year in violation of UN sanctions. (Diplomatic relations between North

Korea and Burma were cut off following the 1983 "Rangoon" bombing in which Pyongyang agents killed 17 South Korean officials. Relations were restored in April 2007).

In 2006, Burma was voted onto the permanent agenda of the UN Security Council for the first time in history. On 11 October 2007 the UN Security Council issued its first-ever Presidential Statement on Burma, calling on Burma's military regime to "...create the necessary conditions for a genuine dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all concerned parties and ethnic groups in order to achieve an inclusive national reconciliation with the direct support of the United Nations."

Burma's military regime has defied the Council's demands, refusing to release political prisoners and instead proceeding with a vote on new constitution* written by delegates of the military regime.

"The UN Security Council imposed arms embargoes on apartheid South Africa after the Sharpeville Massacre and Soweto uprising. Now it is time for the UN and individual countries to immediately impose arms embargoes and targeted banking sanctions on Burma following the Saffron Massacre**," said **Archbishop Desmond M Tutu**. "The election promised by the military regime is a complete sham," he added.

*See front page article on the forthcoming referendum.

**The Saffron Massacre is a reference to the recent crackdown by the Burmese military regime on monks and civilians in Autumn 2007.

Update on Burma

Electricity shortages in Rangoon and Magwe

Residents of Rangoon and Magwe divisions have complained that electricity shortages have become more regular and say the limited supply they have is unreliable.

A resident of Dawpon township in Rangoon division said that the electricity supply was sporadic and frequently cut out. "The electricity is now not even available on the days it is supposed to be," the resident said. "When it comes back on, it only lasts for about half an hour and then it goes off again.

We have complained about this matter to the authorities ... now we are in the middle of summer and it is difficult to get water when the electricity is off. Also, we are spending about 200 kyat every day on candles."

Death of celebrated author Ludu Daw Amar

Ludu Daw Amar, one of Burma's most celebrated writers and journalists, passed away on 7 April 2008 aged 93 years. Born in 1915, Ludu Daw Amar was well known for her political activism, beginning with her involvement in the student movement against the British government. She was co-publisher of the *Ludu* [People's] daily newspaper, along with her husband Ludu U Hla, from its establishment in 1946 until its suspension in 1959. Ludu Daw Amar was also known for her biographies of revolutionary leaders and famous artists, and published her first book while studying at Rangoon University. Around 4,000 people came to pay their respects at her funeral, while supporters, including detained democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, sent floral tributes.

Solo demonstrator given 20-year sentence

A 62-year-old activist who was arrested after staging a solo demonstration in Burma has been sentenced to 20 years in prison. U Ohn Than, who was arrested in Rangoon last year, was found guilty on 3 April 2008 of defaming the government by the city's Western district court. According to central court lawyer U Aung Thein, "he was found guilty of an attempt to defame the government because of the placards he was holding during his solo demonstration. He was given a fine of 1000 kyat and sentenced to 20 years in prison."



Archbishop Desmond M Tutu calling for the international community to impose arms embargoes on Burma.



Book Review:

THE LIZARD CAGE: a novel about life in Burma's jails

Fictions can offer at least as many insights as documentaries, especially when based on direct experience and wide research, as is Karen Connelly's *The Lizard Cage* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007). Her novel won that Canadian author last year's Orange Broadband Prize for New Writers (though she had previously published seven books of poetry and non-fiction), and is the product of numerous visits to Burma (before she was refused a visa) and of almost two years thereafter in Thailand among dissidents and refugees. Set in the mid-1990s in Rangoon's Insein prison (where Aung San Suu Kyi was once held), it features some eight main characters, at once representative and sharply-etched. But it centres on

Teza, a deviser and singer of protest songs who has served seven years of a sentence of twenty in solitary confinement. Convincingly recreating the minutiae of his experience, it plots the course of his moving relationship with a twelve-year-old orphan growing up inside the 'cage'. A compellingly suspenseful narrative, with moments of humour and not a few surprising twists, it is uncompromisingly realistic in its depiction of both viciousness and suffering, but not in the least depressing. On the contrary, though a powerful indictment of all who serve Burma's military rulers, it celebrates the Buddhism-based resilience of those who resist them from within.

Reviewed by Victor Dixon.

JOB ADVERTISEMENT

Burma Action Ireland is looking for a part-time **Coordinator** (19 hrs a week) to co-ordinate and administer all of BAI's activities. The ideal candidate needs to be flexible, efficient, have a background in the voluntary/NGO sector and be experienced in the use of PC's, basic Microsoft office applications and email/internet. For the complete job description, please contact Eileen Seymour on 01 8559753, leaving full contact details including an email address.

AGM Notice 9 June 2008

The Annual General Meeting of **Burma Action Ireland (BAI)** will take place on Monday 9 June 2008 at 7.30pm at Loreto Hall, 77 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2. Agenda items will include reports from the Chairperson, Treasurer and Coordinator. The election of officers will also take place. All are very welcome to attend to both hear about the work of BAI and/or become more actively involved in the group. Refreshments will be served. Please bring a friend. BAI welcomes the help of volunteers at any stage in the course of the year.

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), 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 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. 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.

The information provided on page 2 in relation to the 'Open Hearts' Letter Campaign may be useful at this time.

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

