



Burma Action Ireland

Summer 2006

Newsletter

This newsletter is kindly supported by donations from members and with grant assistance from the Irish Aid programme at the Department of Foreign Affairs



PO Box 6786, Dublin 1, Ireland • Tel: + 353 87 1261857 • Fax: + 353 1 855 9753 • Email: info@burmaactionireland.org • Web: www.burmaactionireland.org

Minister Lenihan launches Burma torture reports

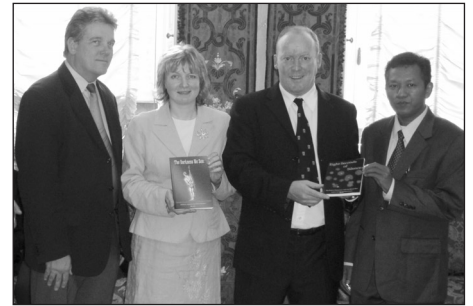
Mr Conor Lenihan TD, Minister of State for Development Cooperation and Human Rights, launched two reports by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners - Burma on 28 June last. The reports entitled 'The Darkness We See' and 'Eight Seconds of Silence' were funded by the **Irish Aid** programme at the Department of Foreign Affairs in association with Burma Action Ireland (BAI). Among those attending the launch in Dublin were **Ko Bo Kyi** from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners - Burma (AAPPB), which compiled the reports. He visited Ireland especially for the launch. During his time here, Ko Bo Kyi also met with Amnesty International and members of Burma Action Ireland. Invited guests at the launch included **Archbishop Diarmuid Martin**, Archbishop of Dublin and Primate of Ireland and his **Excellency Mr Stewart Eldon**, (now former) British Ambassador to Ireland. Diplomatic representatives also attended the launch from India, France and Japan.

The reports concern torture in Burma's interrogation centres and prisons and detail the deaths of democracy activists behind bars. The evidence gathered in the 126-page report 'The Darkness We See' is based on interviews with 35 former political prisoners conducted by AAPPB. The report is divided into sections detailing the various forms of physical, psychological and sexual abuse used by the junta. The document explains how poor prison

conditions combined with medical negligence are encouraged by the junta to cause a degree of suffering tantamount to torture. Speaking about this specific report, **Eileen Seymour**, Chairperson of BAI said: "The interviews have been conducted with male and female former political prisoners as they attempted to re-establish their lives and identities. It concludes that Burma's prisons have become institutions whose primary function is to deliberately shatter the identity of political activists and other civilians deemed threatening by the junta". The report reveals for the first time, the chain of command and individuals responsible for torture in Burma.

The second publication 'Eight Seconds of Silence', records all known cases of political prisoners who have died in custody in Burma since 1988. It details the names, histories, and fate of 127 democracy activists whose deaths were a result of torture or ill-treatment.

Speaking at the launch of both reports, **Minister of State, Conor Lenihan, TD**, said: "Clearly the reports make grim reading and are a reminder to us all that we must redouble our efforts to highlight the situation in Burma and work for change there". He said that Ireland takes a strong position on Burma and: "avails of all opportunities to call for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, to condemn the abuse of human rights and fundamental freedoms and deplore the lack of



Pictured at the launch in Iveagh House in Dublin on 28 June are left to right: Hugh Baxter, BAI; Eileen Seymour, Chairperson, BAI; Minister of State, Conor Lenihan, TD and Ko Bo Kyi, Joint Secretary, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

progress towards democracy in the country". The Minister stated that: "The Irish Government will continue to raise concerns about Burma on all possible occasions and to call on the Burmese government to assume its responsibilities towards its people and to allow the fullest possible UN involvement in a genuine process of democratisation and reconciliation."

The full titles of the two reports launched are: 'The Darkness We See: Torture in Burma's Interrogation Centers and Prisons' and 'Eight Seconds of Silence: The Death of Democracy Activists Behind Bars'. The reports were compiled by the Bangkok-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners - Burma. Copies of the reports are available to download from <http://www.aappb.org/publications.html>

BURMA PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION MARKS JUNE BIRTHDAY

A photographic exhibition entitled **Burma, Forgotten Nation - Forgotten People** marked the 61st birthday of Aung San Suu Kyi on 19 June last. It was opened in Dublin's Market Bar on Fade Street in Dublin 2 by the Director of Front Line, **Mary Lawlor**. The exhibition, which ran at the Market Bar for a week in June and later at the Civic Offices in Dublin in July, will open in **Kinsale** at the Blue Haven Hotel on the **6 November**. The exhibition also had a successful run at the Cork's Vision Centre in early June. **Burma, Forgotten Nation - Forgotten People** features a collection of **40** photographs taken by the Cork photographer, Philip Daly, who recently accompanied Deputy Simon Coveney, TD, MEP on a fact-finding trip to the Burmese refugee camps on the Thailand/Burma border. The exhibition is supported by both BAI and Simon Coveney.

In the photographs, Philip Daly aims to reflect the lives of the refugees - their work, their social structures and their struggle to regain their right to their homeland.

The aim of the exhibition is to create awareness of the situation in Burma - a country of approximately 50 million people with one of the world's worst human rights records. The military government in Burma, who are called the State Peace and Development Council, engage in wide scale forced labour, conscription of child soldiers and torture. Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, is the democratically elected leader of the country. She has been in and out of detention in Burma since 1989 and she spent her 61st birthday once again under house arrest.

The photographs on display were for sale, with proceeds donated to BAI. BAI is extremely

grateful to photographer Philip Daly, Deputy Simon Coveney, Mary Lawlor, social diary photographer, Emily Quinn, The Market Bar, Cork Vision Centre, Dublin Civic Offices/Dublin City Council for their time and effort in making this exhibition possible. Exhibition photographs can be viewed at www.philipdalyp photography.com



Burma: Forgotten Nation - Forgotten People an exhibition of photographs by Philip Daly (right). Sponsored by BAI and Simon Coveney, TD MEP (left).



Shwe gas project will earn Burmese military regime \$12bn

Burma Action Ireland is deeply concerned about new developments on the Shwe Gas Pipeline. As reported in the last edition of this newsletter, Burma's military junta, the State Peace and Development Council, together with a consortium of Indian and Korean corporations are currently exploring gas fields off the coast of Arakan State in Western Burma. The Shwe Gas Movement is concerned with this natural gas project which is presently unfolding. Discovered in December 2003, these fields—labelled A-1, or "Shwe" - are expected to hold one of the largest gas yields in Southeast Asia.

Burma's military regime stands to profit by **US\$12-17 billion dollars** from the Shwe Gas project in western Burma, according to a new

report released by the Shwe Gas Movement in July. The report, titled 'Supply and Command', details how the sale of natural gas to regional neighbours, India and China, threatens to entrench the junta, and will lead to extensive human rights abuses and environmental damage in Arakan and Chin States which form part of the country of Burma. Speaking about this project, and previous pipeline projects, **Eileen Seymour**, Chairperson of BAI says: "Experience from the infamous Yadana and Yetagun gas pipelines provides evidence that the Shwe project will lead to increased Burma army presence in the area, forced relocation of villagers, land confiscation and slave labour."

While the regime purchases more arms with gas

revenues, the local population remains in poverty. Arakan and Chin states are both excluded from the national electricity grid; ninety percent of the population uses candles for light and firewood as their primary source of cooking fuel. People are denied their rights to participate in decision-making about any development projects, including the extraction of local resources. Environmentalists are also concerned about the destruction of virgin forest to provide roads and other infrastructure for the new developments. If you would like to learn more about the Shwe Gas project see www.shwe.org. There is also an online petition to stop the further development of these gas fields in Burma. See www.petitiononline.com/SHWE/petition.html

503 Parliamentarians from 34 countries demand Security Council Action

In June, an unprecedented 503 parliamentarians from 34 countries including Ireland, wrote to members of the United Nations Security Council and the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, calling for a binding resolution to address the crisis in Burma. **Forty-eight signatures** were secured from **Irish TDs, MEPs and Senators** – the highest number after France and Korea who secured 83 and 76 respectively.

The move comes as Security Council members consider holding their first formal discussion on Burma. A draft resolution has also been circulated by the United States.

In their letter the parliamentarians wrote: "There is ample precedent for a Security Council resolution on Burma. The Council has passed resolutions on many countries, including Haiti, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Yemen and Liberia, when internal breakdown was underway. In many of these countries, the Security Council failed to act swiftly, resulting in many innocent lives being lost. This must not be allowed to continue in Burma."

The letter was organised by a group of parliamentarians from six Southeast Asian countries called the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC). The letter was signed by elected representatives from countries including; Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Denmark, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Ireland, Slovenia, US, UK, Austria, and Romania.

"We, as elected representatives from all over the world have joined forces to support our fellow MPs in Burma who were never allowed to take their seats," said AIPMC members on behalf of signatories to the letter.

"They are calling for a binding resolution on

Burma and we support them in that call. It is now time for the United Nations Security Council to intervene. It has the power to pass a binding resolution requiring the regime to engage in genuine negotiations and begin a transition to democracy in Burma, through a process of peaceful national reconciliation."

Eileen Seymour,

Chairperson of BAI said: "We have been overwhelmed by the support of Irish political representatives for this initiative. Action by the Security Council is long overdue."

Support for a non-punitive Security Council resolution on Burma has grown in recent months as the situation in Burma continues to deteriorate. The ruling military junta has increased attacks on ethnic minorities in eastern Burma, an escalation of a campaign that has driven half a million people from their homes as internally displaced persons and over 700,000 refugees over Burma's borders into neighbouring countries. At least 2,700 villages have been burned or otherwise destroyed by the junta.

The junta (known as the State Peace and Development Council) has also forcibly recruited more child soldiers than any other country in the world.

At the same time, harassment of members of Aung San Suu Kyi's party - the National League



The UN Security Council in session. 503 parliamentarians world-wide have called for action on Burma.

for Democracy - has increased and 1,100 political prisoners remain in jail.

In May, UN Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Gambari Ibrahim, travelled to Burma to meet with the leader of the military junta and the leader of the National League for Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi. Mr Gambari raised hopes after his trip by stating that the military regime may end attacks on ethnic minorities and release Daw Suu Kyi and 1,100 other political prisoners. He proclaimed the military junta was ready to "turn a new page" with the international community. One week later, however, the military regime rebuffed his request, extending Daw Suu Kyi's detention for one year and increasing attacks on ethnic minorities. Subsequently, the United States, UK, France, and other countries indicated their support for what could become the first-ever UN Security Council resolution on Burma.



Update on Burma

Pro-democracy activist wins prestigious John Humphrey Freedom Award

Burmese pro-democracy activist Su Su Nway, who challenged the ruling military junta's use of forced labour and won a historic court ruling against the regime last year, is the winner of Rights & Democracy's 2006 *John Humphrey Freedom Award*. Named in honour of the Canadian John Peters Humphrey, a McGill University law professor who prepared the first draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the award includes a speaking tour of Canadian cities to help increase awareness of the recipient's human rights work.

Su Su Nway, 34, from Htan Manaing Village, Rangoon Kawmoo Township, came to the world's attention last year for her individual efforts to see the junta's representatives in her village brought to justice for forcing her and her neighbours to repair a road without pay. Su Su Nway's determination paid off last year when a judge sentenced the village Chairman and a deputy to eight months in prison under an untested law passed in 1999 that bans compulsory labour. The verdict was the first ever against the military regime's long-standing practice of forced labour.

But a few months later, she was tried for "insulting and disrupting a government official on duty," and sentenced last October to 18-months in Rangoon's Insein Prison. Su Su Nway, who suffers from a heart condition, endured nine months in Insein before authorities finally bowed to international pressure and released her on 6 June.

Rights & Democracy (an International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development) is a non-partisan organisation with an international mandate. It was created by Canada's Parliament in 1988 to encourage and support the universal values of human rights and the promotion of democratic practices around the world. The organisation presents the *John Humphrey Freedom Award* each year to an organisation or individual from any country or region of the world, including Canada, for exceptional achievement in the promotion of human rights and democratic development.

Students forced to join pro-junta 'Union'

Six hundred students at the Minggyan Technical College in central Burma have been

forced to join the pro-junta 'student union', the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). The students reported that they were told they would not be permitted to sit their examinations unless they joined the pro-military government union. Burma's students have in the past, taken the lead in demanding democratic freedom from the military regime. An example of this was in the uprising of 1988 which led to the 1990 landslide election victory of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy. Many students have been imprisoned or have chosen to live in exile since the military crackdown of 1988.

Gem auctions enrich junta

The increasing frequency of massive auctions of Burmese precious stones is seen as a sign of the military junta's need to generate foreign currency. The auctions, which take place through the government-owned 'Myanmar Gems Emporium', used to be held bi-annually in Burma, but this year there have been major auctions in July and August, and more are planned. Although the junta refuses to release figures, it is estimated that the July auction may have brought as much as €53 million into the junta's fund. As well as the sale of precious stones, the junta profits from the sale of natural gas (see Shwe Gas article) and teak.

Fascist Disneyland goes one step further

The new capital of Burma, as decreed by the SPDC at Naypyidaw near Pynmana, is shaping up to fulfill Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's description of Burma under the generals as 'fascist Disneyland'. Large statues of the kings of ancient Burma line the route way along the new city airstrip. In addition, the First General of the SPDC, Than Shwe, plans to erect a full-size copy of the famous *Shwedagon Pagoda* in Rangoon in the new capital city. The new pagoda, to be called *Oakpartathanti*, will stand just a foot or so shorter than the original on a hill outside Naypyidaw, and will be visible from all main roads leading to the new administrative capital.

A commentator suggests that: "*Naypyidaw offers the generals all the comforts of Rangoon, without any of the disadvantages: a seacoast vulnerable to foreign invasion, a city with a long tradition of civil uprisings whose streets are full of bloody memories, and that highly irritating lady in her dilapidated lakefront home.*"

NLD excluded from talks on new Burmese constitution

Talks to draw up a new constitution for Burma are due to resume in October. However, the National League for Democracy has been pointedly excluded from taking part in these discussions - since they began two years ago. It is understood that the new constitution will specify a strong role for the military. This is in line with the constitution drawn up in 1974 by General Ne Win and the then State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which established Burma as a one-party state with a central role for the military in the government of Burma. (SLORC is now known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)).

AGM news

The AGM of Burma Action Ireland was on Monday 29 May in Loreto Hall, 77 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2. Agenda items included: the outgoing Chairperson's report, the report of the BAI Coordinator and the outgoing Treasurer's report. Thanks were extended to a number of people including the group's main funder Irish Aid (at the Department of Foreign Affairs) and to those who have given donations this past year and became members. Thanks were also extended to our 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; Amnesty International; Oireachtas members and MEPs, including Deputy Máire Hctor, TD, Deputy Simon Coveney, TD and MEP, Denis and Mary at his Cork office; Senators Paschal Mooney and Brendan Ryan; photographer Philip Daly and the BAI coordinators over the past year who were John Copley and 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 endeavours to date in the role; Victor Dixon was named Vice-Chairperson, the Treasurer is Fr Pat Raleigh and the Secretary is Monica Manning.



AIDS/HIV epidemic in Burma

The rapid escalation of HIV/AIDS in Burma had led to the recent description of the country as the 'epicentre' of the disease in South East Asia. The international community, including the EU and Australia, has donated US\$100 million to Burma in an effort to contain the AIDS epidemic, but NGO workers and National League for Democracy (NLD) spokesmen have expressed doubts about the ability of the Burmese military dictatorship to administer the aid effectively. Volunteers working with AIDS victims have also been experiencing harassment including arrest by the military authorities. An NLD spokesman has said: "They have no idea at all about what the red ribbon - the international symbol for AIDS awareness - represents. They

thought that it was related to a political message." Members of the *Friends with a Red Ribbon* group, including an NLD Youth Wing and the '88 Generation volunteers who are working to provide assistance for HIV sufferers, were arrested in Rangoon recently for not informing the authorities of an overnight stay in a monastery to attend a ceremony of remembrance for AIDS victims. The group included ex-political prisoners, whose colleagues had been infected with AIDS while in prison, due to the policy of sharing needles between patients which is pursued by the prison authorities. The NLD Youth Wing was also harassed for carrying out educational programmes about AIDS/HIV. International aid workers have been forced to

leave Burma because of the regime's policy of requiring 'Memoranda of Agreement' with their organisations. The Global Fund has withdrawn from Burma, citing travel and other restrictions by the country's military-controlled government which impeded the delivery of medical supplies as the reasons for their departure. Several international NGOs, including *Medecins du Monde*, *Medecins Sans Frontiers* and *World Vision*, currently have HIV/AIDS programmes in Burma. They have been forced to sign the 'Memoranda of Agreement' with the junta. Fears that the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) will abuse the new funding to enrich itself, have been expressed by the leader of the Chin ethnic people.

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 sub-committees: **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 (Bishop's Square, Redmond's Hill, 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,
- Express your opposition to the torture in prisons (see front page) and/or the situation with regard to the growing AIDS crisis (see this page).

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.
- Voice your objection to the Shwe gas pipe

line project and/or go on line and sign the petition. (See page two).

- As reported on the front page of our spring edition, 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 this still free-flowing river. It is planned to both exploit the hydropower potential of the entire river basin, as well as to divert water to Thailand. This project has the potential to drown enormous areas of forest lands, rich in bio-diversity, and force the eviction of Burma's ethnic peoples, including Karenni, Shan and Karen. To read more about this project see www.salweenwatch.org and to put your name to a recently-established petition, go to www.petitiononline.com/9202006/petition.html

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).

Burma Action Ireland

PO Box 6786, Dublin 1, Ireland.
Tel: + 353 87 1261857
Fax: + 353 1 855 9753
Email: info@burmaactionireland.org
Web: www.burmaactionireland.org

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 Hctor, TD, Senator Paschal Mooney 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

