



The Asian Tsunami Disaster - what happened in Burma?

Over one month since the Asian Tsunami Disaster, we remain uncertain as to how the tsunami affected Burma, with a 2,276 km coastline along the Andaman Sea.

The official statement by the Burmese junta stressed that "...Myanmar (Burma) has been fortunate to be spared a major disaster in comparison with neighbouring countries." A meteorological officer from Rangoon insisted that Burma's coastline, rising from shallow seas, drained the tsunami of its power. However a computer model created by a University of California geophysicist, illustrates how southern

Burma would have been hit as hard as southern Thailand. Burma however is further from the quake epicentre, with less densely populated areas, and as such may have escaped the worst.

Unsurprisingly, Burma's military regime downplayed the severity of the tsunami. Following the disaster, the junta's newspaper, *New Light of Myanmar**, headlined stories about the generals greeting foreign visitors, without mention of the tsunami's impact on Burma. By 1 January, the military - the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) reported 59 dead, 43 injured and 3,025 made homeless.

To date, the most reliable figures compiled by co-ordinating groups including the UN, NGO's and the Red Cross confirm 86 people dead, 10 missing and 6,000 homeless. Many victims were on coastal islands inaccessible to aid workers. The majority of fatalities were the sea-gypsies-the Salon or Moken people who live and survive on the seas and fishermen from the Irawaddy Division.

The *Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB)* (radio station) confirmed that southern coast villages - Coco Islands in the Andaman Sea and the

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Female Oireachtas members solidarity with Aung San Suu Kyi

At Leinster House, on Thursday 9 December, female members of the Houses of the Oireachtas including (pictured left to right) Róisín Shortall TD, Mary Wallace TD, Fiona O'Malley TD, Liz McManus TD, Sen. Mary Henry, Sen. Geraldine Feeney, Sen. Ann Ormonde, Cecilia Keaveney TD, Jan O' Sullivan TD, Kathleen Lynch TD, Sen. Kate Walsh, Sen. Mary O'Rourke, Máire Hochtór TD, Joan Burton TD, Marian Harkin, TD and MEP and Sen. Mary White, (absent from image, Mildred Fox TD)* marked the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony day in a show of solidarity with Aung San Suu Kyi. The 1991 Nobel Peace prize recipient and leader of Burma's

democracy movement, has spent nine of the last 15 years under house arrest and recently learned that her detention is to be extended for a further year. Her National League for Democracy (NLD) is the largest pro-democracy party in Burma, having won the last free election in 1990 by a landslide. The NLD have been consistently denied power by the military.

Outside Leinster House, Senator Mary O'Rourke read a statement on behalf of the cross party deputies and senators saying: "Today, as fellow parliamentarians, we call upon Burma's military regime to release Aung San Suu Kyi and those duly elected members of

parliament who strive for a peaceful transition to a democratic Burma."

Also adding their voices, film director **John Boorman**, Honorary President of Burma Action Ireland (BAI) said: "It is to our shame that the free world looks away and allows Aung San Suu Kyi to continue her incarceration by the brutal military rulers of that beautiful and benighted land."

Fellow Nobel Peace Laureate **David Trimble** said: "Aung San Suu Kyi has for 15 years been a beacon of hope to Burma's people. Despite spending nine of those years in detention, she has worked tirelessly for a non-violent transition to a democratic Burma, respectful of all its ethnic nationalities. Her courage has won her the support of the overwhelming majority of Burma's people and the profound respect of those throughout the world who share her commitment to democracy and representative government. On this auspicious day, I call for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and a peaceful resolution to Burma's political crisis."

Fellow Nobel Peace Laureate **Máiread Corrigan Maguire** said: "Her heroic actions inspire us all to increase our own actions on behalf of the Burmese people. Aung San Suu Kyi cannot be silenced, nor can we be silent in the face of her sacrifice for us all."



Female Oireachtas members showing their support for Aung San Suu Kyi. *Mae Sexton, TD also sent a message of support.

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Irawaddy Delta, were hardest hit. Aid workers who accessed a section of the Mergui Archipelago, in the Tenasserim Division reported over 200 people dead on a small island near Lambi Island.

The regime's cover up is probably an attempt to safeguard their military interests. DVB reported that military radar installations on Coco Islands have been partly destroyed, with Chinese military officers among the victims. Installations in the Mergui Archipelago and Heingyi Island may also have been destroyed. The presence of the Yadana and Yetagun pipelines in Tenasserim Division, associated with human rights abuses, may also warrant prohibitive access.

In Thailand, 120,000 Burmese work in the fishing industry alone, the majority illegally. The Law Society of Thailand's committee on human rights for stateless and displaced people confirmed the deaths of 200 Burmese fishermen, possibly rising to 800. The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) expressed disappointment by the junta's failure to assist Burmese victims in Thailand.

Eager to suppress any vulnerable weakness, at the emergency summit in Indonesia, attended by leaders and representatives from 29 countries, the junta insisted that Burmese victims did not need international help. The welfare of survivors remains worrying, as

Burma's public health system has been impoverished by military expenditure.

The regime has also hindered the efforts of aid agencies. In a recent RTÉ radio news interview, Justin Kilcullen of Trócaire, expressing his frustration, called on the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern, TD to make strong demands on the Burmese government to allow NGO's into the country for relief operations. In the Irawaddy Division alone, WFP and UNICEF found 10,000 people in immediate need of food and water, despite insistence by the government ministries that *"there is no need for an emergency operation"*.

Speaking on Marian Finucane's RTÉ Radio show, journalist Philip Boucher-Hayes, who went by boat into Burmese waters around the islands, reported damage *"as complete and devastating as along the Thai shoreline"*.

BAI Chairman, Hugh Baxter, who was in Thailand and Burma at the time of the tsunami, outlined similar concerns in a radio interview with Dublin Newstalk 106's Orla Barry. *"What is clear is that the military have understated the known casualties and are totally downplaying the tsunami"*.

If you would like to help, see *"What you can do"* on the back page of this newsletter.

*For readers interested in reading the military's headline stories in their official newspaper – *New Light of Myanmar*, log on to: www.myanmar.com/nlm

57 years of Burmese independence celebrated

On 4 January, the fifty-seventh anniversary of Burma's independence was marked by a number of celebrations by pro-democracy organisations. In Mandalay, in central Burma, a religious ceremony in memory of martyred national heroes was followed by a celebration at the home of Daw Win Mya Mya, a member of the divisional organising committee of the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). The 200 present warmly welcomed another committee member, U Thein Dan, freed from detention the day before. After speeches, discussions were led by two famous authors, Ko Lay (Inwa Gonyi) and Kyi Aung. Another ceremony, attended by 400, took place at the factory of the chairman of Veteran Politicians, Thakhin Thein Pe.

An event at the NLD's headquarters in Rangoon attracted some 600 people, including party members, foreign diplomats, veteran politicians, ethnic national leaders and some recently released political prisoners. Three generations of political leaders recalled their experiences since Burma's independence from British colonial rule in 1948.

On this auspicious occasion, the NLD issued a statement. For the sake of national unity and the welfare of all Burma's citizens, it called for open and honest dialogue between the ruling military junta (the State Peace and Development Council) and political parties representative of the people, and also with ethnic national leaders. To create the proper climate for such dialogue, it urged the need to free, as soon as possible, all political prisoners and the abolition of all unnecessary laws (dating for instance from 1950 and 1975) employed to arrest legitimate politicians. It sought especially, the release from house arrest of the party's leader and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

National Convention to resume

On 12 January, Burma's military junta announced that the country's national convention, which is aimed at drafting a new constitution for Burma, would restart on 17 February, seven months after it was adjourned. Senior junta member Lieutenant General Thein Sein, who chairs the convention commission, told state media in Burma that ethnic armed groups who had signed ceasefire agreements with the regime would be invited to attend. The convention was launched in May 2004, but was boycotted by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). Following the NLD boycott Western governments and the United Nations were also sceptical about the nature of the convention - attended by more than 1,000 hand-picked delegates. The timing of this February restart had been thrown into doubt by the dismissal from office of the democracy roadmap's chief architect, General Khin Nyunt, who was removed as premier in October 2004 and placed under house arrest for alleged corruption. In November, Thein Sein said Burma would go ahead with the roadmap, "because it is not a policy conceived by one person". The military, which has ruled the country since 1962, has promised to bring democracy to the nation of 52 million, but opposition groups have warned that an envisaged constitution would not automatically enshrine key freedoms. The NLD is willing to take part in the reconvened national convention but only if it is allowed to discuss openly the drafting of the constitution, according to NLD spokesman U Lwin.



Update on Burma

HIV/AIDS PREVENTION LEAFLET ARREST

An older citizen, U Khin Maung from Khayan Township, Rangoon Division was recently arrested and detained by local Burmese authorities for possessing and reading an educational leaflet on the prevention of HIV/AIDS. U Khin Maung, who is over 70 years old was arrested for possessing an "illegal" leaflet and detained for six hours. He was told not to leave his home for two days. It has been assumed the leaflet he was reading is one officially published and distributed by the National League for Democracy for health education purposes.

VILLAGERS FORCIBLY RELOCATED IN CENTRAL BURMA

Villagers at Yamethin District, Mandalay Division in central Burma, have been forced to relocate their villages. The township authorities and its Dam and Canal Department are forcing villagers from Inkhon village and the Letpan group in Tatkone Township to relocate in order to

build a new reservoir. There are around 200 households in Inkhon village alone and the military authorities have been refusing to give them compensation - except new plots of land to build their new homes and some expenses for relocation. The authorities also confiscated farmlands of Inkhon villagers and more than 2,000 acres of paddy fields.

OPPOSITION TO GAS PIPELINE TO INDIA FROM BURMA

The energy ministers of India, Bangladesh and Burma will meet in Rangoon early this year to discuss the possibility of building a gas pipeline through Bangladesh to India from the sea off the coast of Arakan State in western Burma. The exiled Arakan National Congress (ANC) denounced the plan in a statement issued recently, as it says the gas belongs to the people of Arakan State and they will not be enjoying the profits from the project. The statement also added that the project would damage the environment, and that in its construction,

the Burmese military junta will subject people to forced labour, forced relocation of their villages and other human rights abuses.

During construction of a UNOCAL - total pipeline in the 1990's the Burmese army engaged in widespread human rights abuses including forced relocation of villages and forced labour. Unocal announced in December 2004 that it had reached an out-of-court settlement in a case brought by local villagers in US courts alleging that Unocal had aided and abetted the abuses.

HONORARY CITIZEN OF PARIS

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded an honorary citizenship of Paris by its city council in a ceremony held on 10 December. The award was granted to her for her selfless and non-violent actions for the people of Burma. Dr. Sein Win, Prime Minister of the exiled National Coalition Government Union of Burma (NCGUB) received the award on her behalf. He thanked the city's authorities for granting his cousin the award and expressed his pride for accepting the award on her behalf. He added that the award will greatly help the efforts to democratise Burma.

Kofi Annan voices concern over Daw Suu Kyi

The UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan has expressed his concern over the health, condition and safety of Burma's democracy leader and General Secretary of the National League for Democracy (NLD), Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

His comment came in December after the country's military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), withdrew 13 youth members of her NLD party who have been taking responsibility for her security inside the compound where she remains in detention - 54/56 University Avenue, Bahan Township, Rangoon. (This compound is also the location where Daw Suu Kyi was first detained in July 1989).

The US government has also stated that it is particularly concerned. A

spokesman for the US State Department, Richard Boucher said that the junta would be held responsible for all the consequences.

Currently, no one is taking responsibility for Daw Suu Kyi's personal safety within the compound and visits by her doctor have also been considerably reduced. The only staff remaining with the 1991 Nobel Laureate are Daw Khin Khin Win, an NLD women-wing member, and Khin Win's daughter.

Pro-democracy support groups throughout the world including BAI, urge all parties concerned to secure the safety and complete personal security of Aung San Suu Kyi who will be 60 years old on 19 June.

Female Oireachtas members solidarity with Aung San Suu Kyi

(from page one)

BAI Chairman, **Hugh Baxter**, commended the Oireachtas members' show of support and added: "Recent developments indicate that Burma's military junta intend to hold Aung San Suu Kyi captive for a prolonged period. It is imperative to maintain concerted international pressure on the generals to secure her release."

The human rights record of Burma's military government is among the worst in the world. Among its excesses are wide scale forced labour, conscription of child soldiers, political prisoners, torture, extra-judicial executions, systematic rape and forced relocation of ethnic minorities. Aung San Suu Kyi formed the NLD in 1988 and, in the face of military rule, pursued a policy of non-violent civil disobedience. She has since endured three separate periods of detention totalling nine years. Her current detention began with a 30 May 2003 attack on her travelling convoy.



Freedom for Min Ko Naing

Burma's most famous student leader Min Ko Naing was released on 19 November from Sittwe (Akyab) Prison in Arakan State. His name may be familiar to readers of this BAI newsletter as we have mentioned his name in conjunction with several political prisoner articles. Min Ko Naing, who was incarcerated for nearly 16 years, gave special thanks to all those who worked hard for his release. He told well-wishers including representatives from foreign embassies who came to greet him, that he will address the new generation of students and the people of Burma after examining more closely, the situation in his country. BAI would like to sincerely thank all its readers, who over the last number of years have written appeal letters to Burma's military regime for his specific release and the release of all Burma's political prisoners.



BAI members Mary Montaut (pictured) and Eileen Seymour attended a Women into Politics initiative marking International Human Rights Day with a conference on globalisation and the challenges for women's participation and leadership. Held in Belfast on 10 December, the day was dedicated to Aung San Suu Kyi.

Public Meetings

Burma Action Ireland will hold a series of public meetings based on the theme 'Burma - Beyond the Silence' in early February. Some of the topics that will be discussed will include: What is happening in Burma? Why do we hear so little? Did it escape the tsunami? What is the status of Aung San Suu Kyi? and what can we do to stem human rights abuses? These meetings beginning at 8pm, will be open to the public and all are welcome to attend. The chosen dates are: Monday 7 February (Galway), Tuesday 8 February (Dublin) and Wednesday 9 February (Belfast).

The guest speakers will include Burma expert Harn Yawngnwe from the Euro Burma Office. For further details contact BAI (details below).

"In physical stature, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is petite and elegant, but in moral stature she is a giant.

Big men are scared of her. Armed to the teeth and they still run scared."

(Archbishop Desmond Tutu)

What can you do?

BAI is always pleased to welcome new members. Please contact John Copley (BAI contact details below). In addition, there are other ways you can help the people of Burma:

Politicians

Write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr **Dermot Ahern**, TD (Iveagh House, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2), your local TD and/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:

- To demand that the military regime be totally transparent about the numbers of deaths in Burma from the recent tsunami in Asia and ask for the immediate and unhindered access by aid agencies to their country,

- Take all necessary measures toward a speedy restoration of democracy in Burma,
- Demand the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Regarding the central issue of the oppression of the Burmese people

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.

In addition to asking for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, please ask the SPDC to take action on the following:

- To be totally transparent about the numbers of deaths in Burma from the recent tsunami in Asia and ask for the immediate and unhindered access by aid agencies to their country,
- 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 Development Cooperation Ireland.

The mailing of this newsletter is courtesy of Senator Paschal Moone and Senator Brendan Ryan.

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

Chairman:
Hugh Baxter

