



A child soldier in Myanmar.  
Photo by Richard Dizon

# THROWING WATER INTO THE SUN

CATHY PRESTON-THOMAS speaks to a Mon refugee and discovers the plight of ethnic minority groups under Myanmar's military regime.

Mon refugee Min Thet Naing is now an Australian citizen. Naing, a political activist, had tried to escape from Burma in 1991 but did not succeed. He had been under constant scrutiny from the authorities as a result of his political activities and felt it would not be safe to continue living in Burma. He was stopped en route and detained in a police cell for one month. His parents still haven't disclosed how much money they paid to bribe the guards and secure his release.

A year later Naing finally managed to escape Burma. One day in complete secrecy he left the country forever. He didn't say goodbye to anyone and took only a backpack with him on his

perilous journey. It took a week to travel overland to Thailand, where he spent the next 18 months assisting other Mon refugees before resettling in Australia.

Naing's parents were questioned extensively by the military regarding his escape. He found it almost impossible to correspond with them from Thailand or Australia. They have since joined him in Australia.

In Burma the ethnic minority groups are at the forefront of the armed struggle against the military dictatorship, known officially as the State Peace and Development Council (formerly the State Law and Order Restoration Council or SLORC). Consequently they have also been subject

to the harshest of human rights abuses. One of these ethnic minorities is the Mon people.

## A Brief History of the Mon

Myanmar, or Burma as it is still commonly known, has one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the world. There are 21 major ethnic groups and over 100 languages in a population of over 47 million.

Arriving in Myanmar between 2500 and 1500 BC the Mon people are the oldest inhabitants of the area. Their history is marked by a struggle for self-determination where they have endured discrimination, persecution and displacement. Since ►



the current military regime came to power in 1990, repression of the Mon has intensified. Of four million Burmese Mon, an estimated 100,000 have fled to Thailand as refugees and economic migrants.

In 1962 the democratic government of U Nu was overthrown by a military coup lead by General New Win. The New Mon State Party responded with an armed resistance movement. Twenty years later they were still active against the dictatorship and joined the National Democratic Front, an umbrella organisation for the ethnic minorities supporting democracy.

The armed struggle against the military junta by the New Mon State party continued until a controversial cease fire agreement was signed with SLORC in mid 1995. While the armed struggle has abated, Mon people continue to support the overthrow of SLORC through non-violent means.

## Slave labour and relocation of the Mon

The types of human rights violations suffered by the people of Myanmar varies according to their geographical region and ethnicity. The military regime's policies relating to slave labour and mandatory relocations have had a devastating effect on Mon communities.

As an ethnic minority the Mon people have been targeted with assimilation policies to undermine their cultural practices. The Mon language, for example, is banned in schools and universities, and even signs in Mon are destroyed and replaced. Naing estimates that only 25% of Mon people now speak their traditional language.

Use of a slave labour is one of the most distinctive features of SLORCs dictatorship. Compulsory labour, including women, children and the elderly is routinely used for infrastructure and maintenance projects, including the refurbishment of tourist sites. An International Labour Organisation Special Commission of Inquiry into Forced Labour in Burma reported in 1998 that

workers were denied medical treatment (for example, when they suffered malaria), suffered frequent beatings, and that porters were sent into dangerous military situations where they risked being caught in cross-fire.

Currently there are two large development projects being undertaken in Burma — the construction of a gas pipeline and a railway. Both projects cut through traditional Mon land and local Mon villages have been forced to provide labour (usually a quota of at least one worker per family), or face fines and/or arrest. The male head of the family is usually required to perform the labour but women or older children may be demanded as an alternative. As a result, households are left without male protection and are short of labour for their own requirements.

In Burma weak property rights have facilitated forced relocations of whole communities. The state owns all land and private rights are contingent upon use the state deems productive. Reasons for relocation vary from commercial or public works (such as the large scale evacuations due to the train and gas pipe line), to a method of social control. People are moved en masse from cities to 'new towns' on short notice and without reimbursement. The community becomes dispersed, community structures are dismantled and the standard of living drops dramatically, as there is limited infrastructure in these 'new towns' and conditions can be quite primitive. The US Department of State reports that prostitution has become increasingly overt in the 'new towns'.

In 1990, Naing's neighbourhood in Rangoon was demolished to make way for a military hostel. The impact on the community was devastating. Their houses were taken without any compensation. In fact, families were charged 5000 kyat to relocate to an inhospitable area two hours drive from the city. There was no water supply, no electricity, no transport and no school. Those who could not afford the fee were forced to

relocate across the river and had to clear land for building. They were given no building materials and had to construct shelters out of whatever materials they could find.

"I was so angry," says Naing. "What could be worse than that? I didn't understand it until I went to Thailand and I realised it was a method of keeping the people under control, to separate people, to prevent them communicating with each other. People don't know what is going on because information is so tightly controlled".

## International interventions in Myanmar

As a supplier of 60 per cent of the world's heroin, Myanmar is a country of concern to the international community. The violent military violent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in a 1988 uprising also focused international attention on Myanmar.

However, the international community is far from united on its approach to Myanmar. Myanmar's main trade partners are Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Singapore and the United States. While there is public condemnation of the regime, countries like these provide it with much of its cash base.

Many Western countries have adopted an isolationist strategy, cutting humanitarian aid, imposing arms sanctions and imposing some trade sanctions. Despite this policy, foreign investors continue to invest heavily in Myanmar. Attempts at introducing general trade sanctions through the United Nations have failed due to lack of support from several nations including China.

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) follows a policy of 'constructive engagement' with Myanmar. This is basically a 'non-policy' that leaves individual members to formulate their own relationship with Myanmar. When Myanmar became a full member of ASEAN in 1997 there was hope that this would have a positive effect on the democratic process, however this



has not yet been realized.

Both strategies of isolationism and 'constructive engagement' have not worked so far, perhaps in part due to the lack of consistent international approach. Human rights violations in Myanmar are on the increase so what approach is Australia adopting in response?

### **Australian Government policy**

Until recently, Australia has maintained an isolationist policy towards Myanmar. It suspended development assistance and placed a ban on defense exports to Myanmar. Australia's policy is neither to encourage nor discourage trade and investment with the regime however trade with Burma has been limited.

But now Australia has adopted a radical change in its approach to Burma, in a move that defies other western nations. Australia has begun to directly engage with the military junta in its own interpretation of 'constructive engagement'. The policy change was cemented by the visit of the Australian Human Rights Commissioner, Mr Chris Sidoti, to Rangoon in August 1999. Negotiations with the junta began with a proposal to form an independent human rights institution in Myanmar and provide 'human rights workshops' for regime officials.

The change is apparently motivated by the Howard government's commitment to promoting human rights in the region. The Australian government argues that the situation in Burma has reached a stalemate and that a 'creative' approach is needed to facilitate change. Human rights training would be the beginning of building a 'dialogue' with the regime, designed to maximize Australia's influence.

"Encouraging the SPDC [military junta] to open a dialogue necessarily involves achieving some level of engagement with them," wrote Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer in a letter to the Burmese consulate earlier this year. "We have sought to open up a dialogue with the SPDC on specific issues, with some



A girl on Lake Inle in Shan State.  
Photo by Richard Diron.

degree of success...the Government's policies are designed to maximize Australia's leverage so that our views will be heard and heeded."

The actual purpose of 'human rights workshops' provided to the military junta has been clouded by a lack of information as to what the workshops entail. What we do know is that the training has included a four-day Human Rights and Responsibilities Workshop and a nine-day International Law Overview

Workshop for 50 Burmese officials. The first two were held in Rangoon from July 4 to 13, the third was planned for October but at the time of press was postponed, apparently due to the current repression of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD).

No serving military personnel are involved in the workshops but participants in the training sessions are hand-picked by the junta. The workshops are part of an assistance ►





A Mon girl in traditional dress.  
Photo by Richard Dixon.

package worth \$4000,000 that also included community health projects and aid for the resettlement of refugees.

The move to conduct human rights training with Burma has put the Australian government at odds with much of the Burmese community. Naing describes the offer of human rights training to the military junta as 'being like throwing water into the sun'. No one expects that the workshops alone will have a positive impact, but to both supporters and detractors of the concept, it is an important matter of symbolism. To supporters they signify the beginning of Australian influence through increased dialogue, for detractors they are a recognition of the legitimacy of the military regime.

Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and elected leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has spoken out against the Australian government's change of policy. She argues that there is a risk that the junta may use it as a propaganda tool to legitimize the regime. She also has concerns about the timing the proposal. Offered in a period where the junta is at its most oppressive, it could be perceived as an approval of the present policies. The timing

is also interesting given the wider political context of the Howard government's very public withdrawal and condemnation of UN Human Rights Committees.

So why would Australia risk further legitimising the regime? Why jeopardise a good relationship with the NLD who are the democratically elected government of Myanmar (it is widely recognized that if the junta collapses the NLD will have the pivotal role)? Why risk the wrath of the international community with break-away policy? Why the sudden commitment to promoting human rights in Myanmar? And why is there so little information available to the public?

One explanation is that the approach is being used as a trade-off. Australia is currently seeking to join ASEAN's free trade zone. Myanmar has the capacity to block Australia's entry, which would in turn limit Australia's trading capacity.

Another explanation for the increased interest in the regime is its role in regional security. Myanmar has always had a policy of equidistance between its powerful neighbors China and India, but that has also changed. Myanmar has been increasingly aligned with China, upsetting the balance of power in the region (strategically Myanmar could facilitate China's trade through access to Andaman Sea). Between 1990 and 1998 China is reported to have supplied nearly US\$52 billion worth of arms to Myanmar, plus economic aid, technical assistance and conducting joint military training exercises.

No matter what the motivations behind the Australian government's change in approach to Myanmar we won't see the consequences for a long time and they may be indistinguishable from other issues in the broader context. It is anticipated that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will continue to down-play the fact that it is providing human rights workshops. By throwing water into the sun you can create a rainbow, or an illusion of one.

## The future

It is clear that the Burmese will continue their ongoing struggle for democracy. Despite the sketchy political commitment from the international community and despite the lack of progress, the struggle is kept alive. It is a struggle with many sacrifices. There is a very real risk for those Burmese who are actively involved in the pro-democracy movement that their families in Myanmar will be targeted by the military.

"Most Burmese want to live in Burma, they were forced to migrate," says Naing. "If we don't continue our struggle how will our people be free? If we are not involved how will people like you know?...How should I close my eyes and ears when the situation at home goes from bad to worse? You can't be selfish". ■

Cathy Preston-Thomas is a community development worker at STARTTS.

## REFERENCES

'Burma: A Cry of Freedom' .*New Internationalist*, June 1996, no.280.

US Department of State, 1999 Human Rights Report, [www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/1999\\_hrp\\_report/burma.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1999_hrp_report/burma.html)

Downer, Alexander. *Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs: Message to the Burmese Community Melbourne*, 27 May 2000.

For some choice examples of the Myanmar regimes propaganda see their government site [www.myanmar.com](http://www.myanmar.com)

Malik M. 'Burma's role in regional security', in Pedersen M, Rudland E & R May (eds) *Burma/Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State*, 2000, Crawford's House: Adelaide.