



BURMA LINKS



MARCH 2001

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How will Canada Respond to the ILO?

Last November, the International Labour Organization (ILO) stepped up pressure on Burma's military regime by calling on all its constituent members — trade unions, businesses and government — to review their relations with Burma and take action to ensure that they are not helping to perpetuate forced labour. While the resolution is not enforceable by the ILO, the Canadian government, as a member, is morally obliged to respond. But will its response mean an end to Canadian corporate complicity with human rights abuses in Burma?

For years Canadian business has profited from the web of human rights abuses — including forced labour — in Burma, with impunity under Canadian law. The Canadian government has been aware of this problem but maintains its hands are tied because of the Special Economic Measures Act (SEMA).

The SEMA prohibits Canada from imposing investment sanctions on another country unless either 1, a grave breach of international peace and security has occurred that has, or is likely to result in a serious international crisis; or 2, that a resolution from an international body, such as the United Nations, empowers such an action.



Karen Human Rights Group

Forced labour site in Burma

CFOB has long argued that the first condition of SEMA applies in Burma's case. Continuing cross-border incursions by Burma's army and the regime's protection of the country's heroin industry, which in turn is linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS throughout the world, constitute a threat to international peace and security. Although Foreign Affairs acknowledges that most of the heroin in Canada originates in Burma, its lawyers reject this argument.

Fast forward to November 30, 2000 and the ILO's resolution on forced labour. As an international body in its own right, and a body of the United Nations, the ILO'S resolution should trigger SEMA's second condition.

But Foreign Affairs is avoiding any

action. Just how much corporate complicity will it take to move them?

Canadian imports have more than doubled in just the past year to \$44 million today. At least eight new Canadian companies have invested in or expanded already-existing investment in Burma since the government imposed voluntary sanctions in August 1997. One of those projects — the biggest — is Ivanhoe Mine's Monywa copper mine, a 50/50 joint venture with the military regime, which has already invested over \$200 million and is currently seeking another \$390 million to expand the mine. Eight villages were forcibly relocated to make way for the expansion project last July, homes and belongings confiscated with

(cont'd on page 2)

SEE PAGE 5 FOR **MIN KO NAING** CAMPAIGN UPDATE!



Secret Talks Spark Cautious Optimism

Hope has been sparked that a decade-old deadlock between the generals and pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi could be broken after word emerged in early January that the two sides have been holding secret talks for nearly four months. This dialogue, the first since 1994, is being called a "landmark" by dissident exiles and hailed by the United Nations. But some Western diplomats in the region say it's evidence the junta is in desperate economic straits.

The next meeting between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the military, slated for mid March, will take place under more politically charged conditions than expected. The death of Lt. Gen Tin Oo, fourth most powerful figure in the SPDC lineup, and two other top generals has shaken the power structure and intensified the rumoured factional struggle between the intelligence chief and SPDC Vice-Chair Gen. Maung Aye. As well, the International Labour Organization's March 8 governing council meeting on the world's response to its plea to end forced labour in Burma has been buoyed by the ICFTU's strong statements at a recent conference in Tokyo.

Bill Jordan, general secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which represents 156 million members around the world, told a press conference, "One of the reasons why we called for this meeting is, contrary to what the military junta is saying to governments, the practice of forced labour [in Burma] continues unabated...If you have trading relationships with the military regime ... you are, without doubt, sustaining the military regime and the abuses that have been perpetrated by the military regime."

Is the SPDC serious about change or is this just public relations, designed to secure renewed foreign investment and better relations between Burma and its neighbours? At first glance, the International Crisis Group's (an international think-tank) conclusion that the regime has never been so strong seems correct. India's foreign minister Jaswant Singh visited the generals in mid-February saying India had no option but to get on good terms with the regime. His country wants to build joint hydroelectric projects for export on the shared border. The Japanese seemed ready to resume large-scale official development assistance, around \$9 million. Even the Russians want to build a nuclear reactor, for scientific purposes.

But unless the talks lead to fundamental political and economic change such new investment will only prolong the suffering of most of the people of Burma. There is not enough rice in the country to fulfill new export contracts and feed everyone at home. The value of the kyat bounces around but with the entrenched and massive overspending on the bloated military, and with inflation is running at more like 20% than the official figure of 3.59, its future is precarious. To be meaningful, steps toward reconciliation will have to address these facts.

ILO (cont'd from page 1)

no compensation to the victims. There is evidence that the project has likely benefitted from forced labour used to build some of the infrastructure on which the mine relies.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) states "...any commercial or economic links with Burma in effect today helps the junta 'to perpetuate or extend the system of forced or compulsory labour', in the meaning of the ILO Resolution of June 2000." Therefore, Canada's businesses in mining, gas, textiles, shrimp, fish, teak wood, air transport (the Mandalay airport), automobile or motorcycle manufacturing, and telecommunications are all connected either directly or indirectly to forced labour or severe violations of core labour standards.

Given their track record, Canadian companies won't respond to the ILO. But what about the government? Will it finally take the opportunity presented to it and hold these companies accountable for their actions? Or will it continue to be complicit in perpetuating the suffering of the people of Burma?

UNLD Revival

In the midst of news that the Burma's military has begun talks with Aung San Suu Kyi, another significant event occurred which didn't get so much attention. Burma's non-Burman ethnic nationalities convened a conference to revive the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD). The UNLD, an umbrella organization for non-Burman political parties formed in the wake of the 1988 uprisings, was brought back to life by the exiled politicians after its draft constitution was ratified and executive members were elected.

The timing of the group's revival is no coincidence. Burma's ethnic minority leaders welcome the new talks with cautious optimism, but felt it necessary to reiterate one of the UNLD's key goals. The realization of a Tripartite Dialogue, which would include the SPDC, the NLD and ethnic leaders is necessary for Burma to evolve into a stable democracy.

During the conference, Shan spokesperson, Khun Markoban, likened the rights of ethnic nationalities and democracy to two wheels on the same bicycle. "They must be given equal importance in order to move the whole country forward," he said.

The UNLD is made up representatives from central Burma, Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Shan states.

Canadian Solidarity for Students in Burma

(based on an article written by Katie Meyer published in Guelph University's Ontarion)

Min Ko Naing was a student, but now he is a political prisoner. For the last twelve years, he has spent his life in solitary confinement suffering physical and mental torture because he wanted something that you and I take for granted every day.

Students at universities and organizations across the country are now involved in a nationwide campaign to raise awareness about the situation of student rights in Burma among Canadian students so they will put pressure on Burma's military dictatorship.

Prison conditions in Burma are appalling and torture is common. The few people who have seen Min Ko Naing report that he is in poor condition and completely isolated. He is only allowed to speak to people for 80 minutes a year. At the beginning of his confinement, he was forced to stand in water for two weeks until he collapsed. Now he is said to be suffering from nervous tremors, a gastric ulcer, and is near paralysis.

The campaign was initiated by Burma activists through Rights and Democracy, Canadian Friends of Burma (CFOB), the Burmese Student Democratic Organization, and Amnesty International. It has distributed 60,000 cards calling for Min Ko Naing's unconditional release and that of "all other student prisoners of conscience in Burma". The postcard also reiterates the right to education. The regime has virtually destroyed the country's once vaunted educational system.

Since the coup in 1962, students in Burma have been at the forefront of opposition to military rule. Thousands have been killed and imprisoned and continue to face severe persecution. Students led the nation-wide protests in 1988, which the military brutally crushed, massacring over 3,000 unarmed demonstrators. Most of the 1,700 political prisoners in Burma are students.

Activists in Canada and Burma are asking that economic



A rally for Burma in Ottawa, 1996

sanctions be applied to Burma because of the support foreign business provides the military regime. Corinne Baumgarten, Program Director of CFOB says that, even though the Canadian government discourages business in Burma, in the past few years, Canadian trade and investment there has skyrocketed.

"We already have specific evidence of Canadian companies benefitting from and perpetuating a variety of human rights abuses including slavery and forced relocation. That's the nature of foreign business in Burma — you just can't avoid being complicit in human rights abuses there."

To further the campaign for student rights in Burma, Baumgarten urges students in Canada push their schools to adopt policies that ensure they don't support the system of repression in Burma through their economic activity. These kinds of policies, which are modeled after the ones used to put pressure on South Africa's apartheid regime, have already been adopted at dozens of universities in the United States and a few are in the works in Canada.

CFOB

Burma's Forsaken Persevere

By Corinne Baumgarten, CFOB Program Director

Exiled from their country, fleeing political persecution and human rights abuses — Burma's refugees in India and Thailand face a multitude of obstacles in their daily lives. I had the opportunity to visit some Burma groups in New Delhi and on the Thai-Burma border last fall and saw some of these difficulties first hand.

While there are a few hundred registered refugees living in New Delhi, there are roughly 50,000 illegal refugees living on India's north-eastern border with Burma. And the 120 thousand registered refugees living along the Thai-Burma border are only a fraction of about one million others living in Thailand with no status whatsoever.

There are many differences between the situations of refugees in India and Thailand but also many similarities. On both borderlands, in India and Thailand, Burmese of all ethnic backgrounds face prejudice, the threat of deportation or imprisonment on a daily basis. Last summer hundreds of the predominantly Chin refugees on the northeast Indian-Burma border faced mass deportations back to Burma by Indian officials from the state of Mizoram. Some were imprisoned in Burma and some returned back to India and a life where uncertainty is the norm. Refugees in Thailand also face periodic mass round-ups, forcible deportation, arrests and imprisonment, and a life of constant insecurity.

Hateful rhetoric about Burmese refugees in both countries compounds their vulnerability. A common refrain in Thailand is that Burmese are stealing jobs from the Thais and are trouble-makers. In India, and especially on the north-east border, all Burmese are said to be criminals and drug traffickers.

Most refugees living on the borders have no legal status and so are extremely vulnerable to exploitation - including not being paid - from employers, sex traffickers and drug dealers. Some workers in Thai-based factories are required to work overtime. It's believed that owners put meta-amphetamines in the employees' water so they can withstand the extremely long hours. They seldom find means of recourse.

On both borders women and girls from Burma are particular targets of the sex trafficking industry. Forced or tricked into prostitution, they then face the scourge of HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. In the workplace women refugees are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault.

In Thailand, the presence of international organizations provide some relief from these problems. Unfortunately on India's North-East border — deemed to be a volatile area by the Indian government — international organizations are not permitted.

The difficulties these people endure is so much more than can be seen on the surface. Separated from their families, lost



CFOB

Two recently-orphaned children from Burma in Mae Sot, Thailand November 2000

to their loved ones, it is sobering to realize that for most of them, this is better than the alternative — long-term jail sentences, torture, forced labour and other abuses. It's the difference between life and death for many of them.

That is why my visit was such a bitter-sweet affair. At the same time that I was looking into the heart-breaking faces of two recently orphaned children in Mae Sot, I was inspired by the recently-opened school established for them. In New Delhi, while the women from the Chin Women's Organization were being harassed by their landlord for office rent they could not afford (for their spartan room), they still managed to persevere in their tailoring training. Sometimes they resorted to sewing paper when material ran out. Throughout my trip I was inspired by the many people from different ethnic backgrounds cooperating, working together and helping each other.

They are victims of a brutal military regime but they are also part of a courageous movement to empower themselves and improve their lives.

BURMA ACTION

To make "Burma Action" most effective, we need your help.
Please contact us with activity ideas and event information in advance of
our next publication.

Stop Canadian Corporate Complicity in Burma

Increasingly, Canadian corporations are financially supporting Burma's SPDC and in some cases, being complicit with the regime's human rights abuses. By turning a blind eye and in some cases, by providing tax incentives for this business, the Canadian government is in effect perpetuating the suffering of the people of Burma. The Canadian government must immediately put a stop to these socially destructive business practices. Write to your Member of Parliament, and send copies to the Foreign Affairs Minister, the Prime Minister and CFOB.

WRITE YOUR M.P.

Find your MP using your postal code:
http://canada.gc.ca/directories/direct_e.htm Or Search at <http://www.parl.gc.ca>

**LETTERS
DO WORK!**

Key Points to include:

- 1 Although there are glimpses of hope in Burma's political situation with recent talks between Aung San Suu Kyi and the SPDC, human rights abuses, including forced labour, continue unabated.
- 2 Since the Canadian government passed Selective Economic Measures in August 1997 to discourage business in Burma, Canadian trade with Burma has more than doubled – in just the past year to the current amount of \$44 million – and investment has skyrocketed. Moreover, according to our research, at least eight new Canadian companies have invested in or expanded already-existing investment in Burma since the government imposed voluntary sanctions in August 1997.
- 3 Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratically elected National League for Democracy — which won 82% of the vote in the 1990 elections but are still prevented by the military from taking office — have been calling for sanctions against their own country because most foreign business goes to propping up the junta and very little to ordinary people.
- 4 The International Labour Organization's November 30, 2000 resolution can and should be used by the Canadian government to impose economic sanctions against Burma's military regime.
- 5 The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions which has been reporting evidence of forced labour in Burma to the ILO for the past decade, firmly believes that it has become virtually impossible for any foreign firm, company, government or other institution, to conduct any trade or other economic activity with or in Burma without providing direct financial support to the military junta.
- 6 The biggest foreign mining investment in Burma is Ivanhoe Mines, a Canadian-registered company in a 50/50 joint venture with the SPDC. They are currently seeking investors to fund the expansion of the project which will cost \$390 million. Last June, eight villages were forcibly relocated to make way for the expansion, houses and belongings confiscated, with no compensation to the victims.

NO POSTAGE NECESSARY!

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Write Canada's biggest Corporate Offender

*to Stop Propping up Burma's Military Regime
and Perpetuating the Suffering of the People of
Burma!*

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• HEALTH •

A Common Ground for all of Burma's Ethnic Groups

The first Health Conference, hosted by the National Health and Education Committee and the Burma Medical Association, drew health representatives from all of Burma's ethnic groups and border areas to discuss pressing primary health care issues faced by migrant workers, refugees and internally displaced persons. While the talks centered around specific illnesses and diseases, the over-arching theme of the conference was to enable border based health organizations to look to the future



Mother and child refugees from Burma

Karen Human Rights Group

and use the time together to map out a plan of action for when political change comes to Burma and the national health system is able to be re-established. What action needs to be taken now, and by whom, to ensure that leaders in border based health work remain in the forefront of

future reconstruction and rehabilitation of local communities? What efforts are currently needed to prepare local communities to participate fully in this reconstruction phase when it occurs?

Such questions and many more were raised throughout the conference to help the participants think long term while they planned their respective health programmes. The diverse group of ethnic players at the table found common ground, using health to create a common front to fight back against the evils of dictatorship and oppression. They agreed on a plan of action for taking this inter-ethnic building agenda forward.



Women from Burma working in a Thai factory, November 2000

CFOB

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Vancouver - The Vancouver Burma Roundtable was rockin' last fall when they held their "Peace for Burma" concert. Over a hundred people came out to the event which featured an eclectic mix of seven bands and raised \$2,000 for relief work along the Thai-Burma border. Entertainers included everything from Nigerian drummers to a 20-member Carnival band, not to mention Vancouver's own Burmese band "Class 88"!

East Kootenay - East Kootenay Friends of Burma are a small community — but they take care of their members, some of whom are former Cambodian refugees sponsored two decades ago. Shauna Jimenez says there's a real sense of responsibility to one another. "It's great that the Cambodians are involved — because of their similar life experience and culture, they can help the Burmese with things like where to get certain foods." And Shauna says the Cambodians are the only ones brave enough to teach the Burmese to drive. Aung Kyaw Thein, one of the recently-arrived refugees the group sponsored from Thailand, has already become a Burma activist. He has joined the Canadian Council of Refugees' working group on anti-racism.

Edmonton - Amnesty International sponsored a talk by Dr. Alice Khin Saw Win at the University of Alberta about the national campaign to Free Min Ko Naing and other

student prisoners of conscience in Burma. Then students formed a Free Burma Group to campaign in Edmonton area universities and high schools. They assembled a mural made up of Min Ko Naing postcards pinned to a picture of the student leader, so that students could pick off and sign the postcards, eventually revealing the complete face of Min Ko Naing.

Regina - Patricia Elliot, author of the White Umbrella, a biography of the former Shan Mahadevi of Yawnghe now living in Vancouver, spoke at a gathering in February along with two teachers who recently returned from visiting Burmese refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. The event, which drew a crowd of 50 people, was organized by the Saskatchewan Council for International Cooperation as part of International Development Week.

Toronto - The Canadian Autoworkers (CAW) presented Daw Aung San Suu Kyi with the Nelson Mandela Humanitarian Award for International Human Rights Day last December. About 100 people from Canada's trade union and Burma movement attended the event. In her video taped message thanking the CAW, Daw Suu noted that "we always imagine auto workers to be full of vim, vigor and energy and their support should really give a great boost to our movement". Carol Philips, director of

CAW's international department, said the struggle for democracy in Burma is similar to that led by Nelson Mandela to combat apartheid. "A cause as just as this against a harshly repressive regime cannot be ignored...it is important to bring attention to Burma where people face slave labour on a daily basis, while we in Canada take normal labour rights for granted."

London - Tin Maung Htoo, General Secretary of the Burmese Student Democratic Organization (BSDO) and Burmese radio journalist, Kyaw Moe, spoke to 250 students and faculty at the University of Western Ontario in January about human rights in Burma and the campaign for student rights. They distributed postcards calling for the release of student leader Min Ko Naing and all other prisoners of conscience in Burma. These will be sent to the Burmese embassy in Ottawa. Tin Maung Htoo also gave similar talks to Oxfam Canada and at Guelph University.

Montreal - Le Comité Solidarité de la Birmanie continues to raise awareness among Montreal's student populations and Quebec's trade union movement. Jean-Michel, the group's founder gives talks about Burma's human rights situation to various organizations and le Comité has found their French-language manual on student rights in Burma to be an excellent outreach tool.

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LIFE IS EASY IN BURMA—

at least for football players on the national team. If they start missing goals or losing games the state-run TV just deletes the bad news.

Irrawaddy reports that play-by-play coverage of the recent Tiger Cup football tournament in Chiang Mai abruptly ceased when Indonesia scored a decisive goal against the Burmese team. Apparently aging senior General Than Shwe got so

mad with the team’s lack of success he said he didn’t want to hear anything more about it – and the obedient media hacks complied.

THAI ELEPHANTS are still crossing the dangerous border into Burma even though the Thai people once raised more than 4 million baht to aid Motala, an elephant who stepped on a landmine in Burma. The reason, according to a mahout in

Thailand’s Long district, is lack of work. Logging has slowed down in the Phrae forest and eco-tourism featuring elephants isn’t yet popular. So 10 elephants of the 24 usually employed in the forest have had to be sent to work in Burma, risking landmines sown by the military in exchange for jobs.

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