



Photo courtesy of MMN

Newly ordained Shan boys are carried on their brothers' shoulders. The local and migrant Shan community come together for religious activities. Chiang Mai, Thailand. 2004

BURMA

Political and Economic Update

Burma/Myanmar continues to be ruled by the military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The democracy movement continues to be oppressed, while daily survival prevails over politics for most ordinary people in the country.

On 30 May 2003, the convoy carrying Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and National League for Democracy (NLD) supporters was attacked by thousands of men armed with sticks, clubs and rocks, whom NLD believed were organized by the military junta. The attack began soon after sunset and continued through the night. The SPDC reported that there were only four people killed during this attack, but exiled opposition groups reported as many as 70 people may

have died in the violence. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was “taken into the protective custody” of the junta that night along with several other NLD members. Many more were placed under house arrest or taken into custody.¹ Some fled the country as fear of further oppression intensified. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi continues to be held in near total isolation.

In August 2003, Kyin Nyunt, the head of military intelligence and No. 3 in the military hierarchy, became prime minister. He then proposed the Seven Step Roadmap to Disciplined Democracy, which was supported by many countries in the region. Thailand in particular was keen to help make the Roadmap work. Critics of the Roadmap, on the other hand, pointed out that there was no time frame specified for carrying out the steps, and that it would not lead to real democratic processes.

In May 2004, the National Convention resumed after eight years of suspension. Meanwhile, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s house arrest continued and in response, the NLD decided to boycott the convention.

Burma Significant Events 2003 - June 2004

2003

May

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is taken to “protective custody” after clashes between her supporters and those of the SPDC occurred in Dipeyin. Some NLD leaders flee to the border as oppression by the SPDC intensifies.

June

(21) Minister of Foreign Affairs of the SPDC and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand signs an MOU on Cooperation in the Employment of Workers.

August

Khin Nyunt becomes prime minister.

(30) Prime Minister Khin Nyunt announces a seven step “roadmap” to disciplined democracy.

October

(11) An armed soldier who was believed to be a deserter from the

Burmese army is shot dead in Thailand.

November

Five senior NLD members are released from house arrest.

2004

January

Khin Nyunt and the Karen National Union’s military leader, Bo Mya, agree to end hostilities.

The SPDC criticize the US for its support of Burmese groups in exile and claims that the US has constantly attempted to destabilize Myanmar.

February

(8) The Bangladesh-India-Myanmar (Burma)-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) grouping sign an FTA agreement. The agreement covers six sectors - trade and investment, technology,

transportation, energy, tourism and fisheries. Full implementation of the FTA for Burma is expected to be carried out by 2017.

NLD members resume monthly meetings throughout Burma for the first time since the Dipeyin incident occurred on 30 May 2003.

May

(17) The National Convention resumes after eight years after its suspension in 1996. The National League for Democracy, the ethnic Shan Nationalities League for Democracy and the United Nationalities Alliance, an umbrella organization comprised of eight ethnic-based political parties, decide to boycott the convention on the grounds that the junta hasn’t released Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and that the proceedings of the convention were undemocratic.

Many observed that the proceedings of the convention lacked any form of equal participation without the presence of the NLD.

In terms of economy, the SPDC’s official estimate GDP growth in 2003 was 13.8%. However, even the ADB reports that the actual GDP growth rates could be “much lower” than the official estimates.² The economy suffered monetary and fiscal instability and imbalances, especially a steep inflation rate (54% in 2003) and an official exchange rate that overvalues the Burmese kyat by more than 100 times the market rate. A crisis in Burma’s private banking sector in early 2003 further weakened the economy. Moreover, Burma continues to face economic sanctions by most countries as a result of continued house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and little to

no progress on democracy.

Despite the widespread poverty, the SPDC’s spending on social services was a mere 1.3% of GDP in FY2003, indicating that little to no assistance was made available to the poor.

Migration Update

In 2004 to 2005, the Mekong Migration Network (MMN) conducted a joint research on migration in the GMS and published the Resource Book: Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion. This section is mainly a summary of the relevant chapters of the book.

It is estimated that at least 3 million people



Photo courtesy of MANN

House in rural capital; economic hardship is a major push factor for migration.

migrate from Burma to foreign countries, at least half of whom go to Thailand. Ethnic nationalities living in border areas often have no other choice but to flee their homes to escape various forms of persecution in their homeland. Over 100,000 ethnic people are living in refugee camps in Thailand while there are about 10,000 Rohingya and thousands of Chin refugees living in Malaysia. Aside from refugees, there are also Burmese migrants all over the world. For example, there were 529 Burmese migrants in South Korea, 3,000 in Japan, and 16,000 Burmese working legally in Malaysia as of August 2003.

Migrants who can afford expensive recruitment fees or have good connections with authorities can migrate legally to countries like Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Japan. In 2003, recruitment agencies facilitated 4,107 workers migrating to these countries legally. According to the Department of Labor, there are 26 recruitment agencies in Burma.³

Despite their legal status, Burmese migrants in these countries still face labor rights violations, and their access to redress mechanisms is limited. In December 2003, for example, some 2,000 Burmese migrants in Malaysia protested against their employer for not receiving the minimum wage and demanding the payment of back pay that was withheld for two years. These migrants were deported without redress.⁴

Meanwhile, all migration flows into to Thailand occur through unofficial means, though many of these migrant workers do legalize their status through the registration system once they are in Thailand. On 21 June 2003, Burma and Thailand signed an MOU on Cooperation in the Employment of Workers during the Asia Cooperation Dialogues forum in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Among other things, the MOU stipulates that a legal migration channel be made available to ordinary workers. However, to date, there has been no reliable



Photo courtesy of MMN

Unequal distribution of wealth is commonplace in Burma, with only a small elite capturing much of the country's economic potential.

information disclosed as to how the SPDC will actually cooperate with Thailand to implement the provisions of the MOU.

Meanwhile, the SPDC has been more open to discuss the issue of trafficking. On 25-26 May 2003, Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs, in collaboration with UNICEF, UN-Inter Agency Project on Trafficking (UNIAP) and Save the Children-UK, organized a National Seminar on Trafficking in Persons. According to the SPDC, the Working Committee for the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons exposed a total of 390 human traffickers in 206 cases in the period from 17 July 2002 to 16 July 2003.

The SPDC allows World Vision-Myanmar and Save the Children-UK to provide some services and support for repatriation of trafficking victims. These international NGOs work in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration on the return and reintegration program for trafficking victims.

On the other hand, there seems to have been no concrete commitments by the SPDC towards ending internal trafficking and forced labor, or toward compensating victims.

For the reception of migrants deported from Thailand, the SPDC has set up a holding center in Myawaddy near the Thai border. The center operates in accordance with the SPDC's guidelines of 18 February 2002, and it has received nearly 10,000 deported migrants since the opening of the center till 30 April 2003. According to the SPDC's *New Light of Myanmar*, migrants are given medical exams, have their citizenship verified, and are returned home. However, deported migrants who were interviewed for the MMN research purposes told a different story: mandatory HIV testing was conducted, with those who tested positive being sent to a hospital in Rangoon. Migrants were passed around for interviews from desk to desk and made to feel like criminals. The SPDC fined each worker MMK3,000



Photo courtesy of MMN

Rural countryside in Burma.

and warned them that they would face six month's imprisonment should they be deported to the holding center a second time.

Responses

Existing responses to migration issues are limited to those carried out by the SPDC or IGOs, most of which focus only on trafficking. Those few INGOs who are allowed to work on the issue of trafficking may also face challenges in implementing their

programs due to the sensitivity of issues. Under the current political environment in Burma, it is extremely difficult for local NGOs to respond to the issue of migration. Thus, most of the existing responses involve awareness-raising activities regarding the negative impacts of migration to discourage people from migrating abroad. Though it is greatly needed, it is almost impossible to conduct pre-migration training on migrants' rights in the receiving country in regard to labor rights, redress mechanisms in the event of rights violations, and the like.

Endnotes

¹Simon Montlake, "Burma's 'Black Friday'" *BBC News*, 16 June 2003.

²Asian Development Bank, *Asian Development Outlook 2003*.

³*Seven Day News Weekly Journal*, 25 March 2004.

⁴Immigration Laws: January, 2004-Number #12.