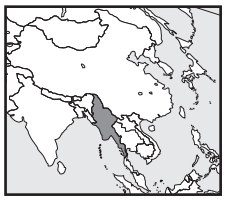
Many crises, no response



Under the ruling Military Junta, the Burmese people live with perpetual crises, whether related to the economy, politics, food or the environment. These have combined to create a situation of extreme poverty, lack of basic rights and increasingly deteriorating social conditions. People's organizations, which may constitute a part of civil society in the future, are underdeveloped, banned or persecuted by the Government. Rights are reserved only for the military elite and their cronies, while the most vulnerable citizens are disproportionately affected by crises and disaster.

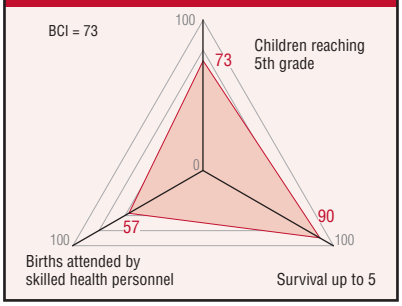
Burma Lawyers' Council

As a result of 47 years of misguided policies, oppression and corruption by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the current global crises that are affecting financial markets, the availability of basic goods and the environment have hit the Burmese faster and harder than other peoples around the world.

Late in 2006, with the annual per capita income at around USD 300, the cost of basic food commodities rose in Burma between 30 and 40% – a tremendous threat for people who spend 70% of their income on food.[1] In August 2007, the Government reduced fuel subsidies, leading to gas price increases. Many people could not even travel to work. As the price of basic goods increased another four to five times, widespread peaceful protests led by Buddhist monks and the vestiges of Burmese civil society broke out across the country. In response, the Government brutally cracked down, firing into unarmed crowds and ransacking monasteries at night. Nearly 2,000 civilians were taken as political prisoners.[2] Participants were sentenced to long prison terms.

Then, in May 2008, the Government failed to provide warning about the impending landfall of Cyclone Nargis, which struck the Irrawaddy Delta with devastating force. An estimated 140,000 people died in the immediate aftermath, while the disaster directly affected at least 3.4 million. The Government refused aid workers entry into the most devastated regions and closed aid camps for displaced citizens, forcing them to return to flood-stricken areas without food, water, shelter or medical care.[3] The SPDC also repackaged foreign aid deliveries to make it seem that the Government was the donor. Amnesty International expressed concern that the Government was using its citizens' suffering in the wake of the cyclone to tighten its grip and expand the reach of its forced labour programmes among a population lacking basic necessities.[4]

Basic Capabilities Index (BCI)



In the same month, the Government held a discredited referendum on the new Constitution, taking advantage of the displacement of cyclone victim. Many of the victims could not vote either in the originally scheduled 10 May balloting or in the additional voting held on 24 May, on the pretext of accommodating displaced voters. Reports also note that Government officials exchanged foreign aid packages for votes and labour.[5] The current global financial, environmental and food crises have intensified the hardships that the Burmese were already suffering. In the face of this dire situation, however, the SPDC has shown no willingness to change its policies or system of governance.

The financial crisis

Burma has long suffered internal domestic financial crises. Inflation in basic commodity prices, including food and fuel, led to widespread protests because individuals could no longer afford these goods and because the price increases translated into job losses. Furthermore, the credit crunch has indirectly affected workers by depressing investment in domestic industries. The market for consumer or small business credit is functionally non-existent. At its heart, the development of a free market economy in the country is a myth, and the right to develop industries is reserved for the ruling Military Junta, their families and their cronies.[6]

Additionally, the SPDC's misuse of the nation's funds for increased military spending continues to have serious consequences for the poorest and most desperate. While the Government was unable to support its citizens in the aftermath of the cyclone without significant foreign aid, it spends nearly half of its budget on the military.

The global financial crisis has worsened the economic reality of the country. The fishing, mining, garment, food processing and advertising industries, for instance, have all suffered.[7] Burmese living abroad are also financially distressed and thus unable to send as much money back to their families as they did before. Developed countries' demand for goods from factories where Burmese migrants work has decreased, both lowering the availability of jobs for migrant workers and increasing abuse as employers attempt to maximize profit margins.[8]

The environmental crisis

There is increasing environmental degradation as the SPDC is putting on sale the rights to domestic resources, both mineral and biological. Burma's neighbours, along with a compliant Government, exploit the country's natural resources without attention to the environmental and cultural consequences. In Kachin state, Chinese loggers are currently extracting wood without considering either the short- or long-term impact, without employing Burmese workers and without providing any stimulus to the

* There are no available data on GEI.

1 Head, J. "The Hardship that Sparked Burma's Unrest". *BBC News*, 2 October 2007. Available from: <news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7023548.stm>.

2 See: Head, J. "Burma Leaders Double Fuel Prices". *BBC News*, 15 August 2007. Available from: <news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6947251.stm>. And also: Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. *Crackdown in Burma Continues*, 31 January 2008. Available from: <www.aappb.org/release100.html>.

3 Tun, A. H. "Myanmar Cyclone Toll Rises to 138,000 Dead, Missing". *Reuters*, 24 June 2008. Available from: <uk.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUKBKK15852620080624?>.

4 Amnesty International. "Myanmar Briefing: Human Right Concerns a Month after Cyclone Nargis". 2 June 2008. Available from: <www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA16/013/2008/en/85931049-32e5-11dd-863f-e9cd398f74da/asa160132008eng.pdf>.

5 Yeni and Min Lwin. "Massive Cheating Reported from Polling Stations". *The Irrawaddy*, 10 May 2008. Available from: <www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=11923>.

6 Pepper. D. "In Burma, Business Ventures Start with Military". *SFGate*, 13 November 2008. Available from: <www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/11/12/MNNU12SBS8.DTL>.

7 See, for example, Mizzima, "Burmese Fishery Export Hit Hard", 27 November 2008; "China Slowdown Hits Burmese Mining", 28 January 2009; "Ad Industry in Burma in Doldrums", 14 February 2009; "Rangoon Factories Begin Cutting Jobs", 5 February 2009. Available from: <www.mizzima.com/news/global-financial-crisis-a-burma.html>.

8 Interviews with Mae Sot, Thailand area factory workers by Burma Lawyers' Council staff, June 2008.

local economy.[9] Similarly, the SPDC has long sold rights to Burma's rich mineral reserves, including gold and gems, without any regulatory oversight of the effects on the environment.

Over the past two decades, Burma has suffered from one of the highest rates of deforestation, losing close to 20% of its forests.[10] This has occurred despite warnings of widespread environmental damage when development ignores the interdependence of ecosystems.[11] A number of large dams that are currently being planned and constructed on Burma's major rivers by Chinese, Indian and Thai corporations and governments threaten the country's biodiversity.[12] The financial benefit goes to the military leaders, while the harm is suffered by the people.

The food crisis

The global food crisis has directly affected Burma, where for decades people have been suffering a localized, domestic alimentary crisis, including a dramatic reduction in protein.[13] While Burma is technically a "food surplus" country because it produces more food than it consumes, inadequate distribution schemes have left the population severely malnourished, with 32% of children underweight.[14] Much of the population is at high risk of food shortages when natural disasters and environmental incidents are poorly managed, illustrated by the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. In Chin state, a recent plague of rats placed 100,000 people at risk of starvation, yet the Government provided no aid.[15]

Crisis in education

Burmese funding for education, both as a percentage of GDP and in absolute numbers, ranks towards the very bottom globally at a mere 1.2% of GDP.[16] Nationally, only about one-third of students who enter primary or secondary schools finish the full curriculum.[17]

Political crisis

Overarching all the other factors is the broken political system. The SPDC and its predecessor dictators have refused to allow a true transition to democracy, despite the steep decline of the country since the military seized power. The regime's "Seven-Step Road to Democracy" is widely viewed as a seven-step road to permanent military entrenchment. Among other points, the new Constitution reinforces the military's unlimited control over government operations, fails to provide for an independent judiciary and lacks meaningful human rights protections.[18] A number of prominent political groups, such as the National League for Democracy (NLD), the New Mon State Party, the Mon National Democratic Front, and the Kachin Independence Organization, refused to participate in the constitutional referendum. Key opposition groups, led by the NLD, plan to boycott the upcoming 2010 election.

In addition, among military ranks a potential crisis is brewing between the SPDC and the United Wa state Army (USWA), which controls part of the Shan State. Although the groups agreed on a ceasefire in 1989, the USWA rejected the order to disarm and become a government-controlled militia. The USWA has been printing official documents as "Government of Wa State, Special Autonomous Region, Union of Myanmar", and have stated that it will neither disarm nor participate in the 2010 elections unless this status is granted.[19]

The SPDC's continued arrests and detention of anyone who dares to criticize Government policy is a clear indicator of its unwillingness to allow meaningful change in the political sphere. In the past year, the house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Laureate and democratically elected leader, was extended. The popular Burmese comedian and social commentator Zaganar was sentenced to 45 years in prison for his criticism of the Government's response to Cyclone Nargis. Currently, there are an estimated 2,100 political prisoners.[20]

Civil society under suspicion

In times of crisis, civil society organizations are crucial in providing relief and an alternative voice to help solve a nation's most pressing problems. In Burma, however, such organizations are underdeveloped, banned or persecuted by the SPDC. The prominent groups that are allowed to exist merely help to prop up the military. For example, the Auxiliary Fire Squad primarily serves as an anti-riot force. Likewise, government-sanctioned women's groups promote government policy rather than lobby to change it. While some community-based organizations do exist, they must receive Government permission to undertake any activity.[21] Furthermore, members of organizations found to have done something "unlawful", which often merely means opposing the Government, are often punished.[22]

Conclusion

Under the ruling Junta, the Burmese people live with perpetual crises, whether economic, political or environmental. In recent years, these crises have frequently served to fuel one another and to perpetuate a harmful status quo. In response, the Government increases its crackdowns and arrests and refuses to provide any form of safety net to its citizens. It has created a country with rights reserved only for its military elite and their cronies, while the most vulnerable citizens are disproportionately affected by crises and disaster. ■

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12 Pichai, U. "Environmentalists Demand Halt to US $ 35 Billion Burma Dams". Mizzima, 16 March 2009. Available at <www.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/1844-environmentalists-demand-halt-to-us-35-billion-burma-dams.html>.

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14 WFP (nd). "Myanmar". World Food Programme (WFP). Available from: <www.wfp.org/countries/Myanmar>.

15 Carroll, B. "Rampaging Rats Bring Starvation to Burma". *BBC News*, 26 September 2008. Available from: <news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7633986.stm>.

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17 "Child Education in Burma". *Asian Tribune*, 3 September 2003. Available from: <www.asiantribune.com/oldsite/show_article.php?id=850>.

18 See: Htoo, A.U. "Analysis of the SPDC's Constitution from the Perspective of Human Rights". *Legal Issues on Burma Journal*, No. 30. 2008; and two publications by the Burma Lawyers' Council."2010 Elections: No Hope for Human Rights". *Legal Issues on Burma Journal*, No. 30.2008, and "Statement on the Failure of the 2008 SPDC Constitution to Protect Judicial Independence". 4 December 2008.

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