

ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY  
for the  
PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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REPORT TO THE WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS 1989

Burma

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Earlier this year research in Burma revealed "a land in a state of deep crisis and a scale of human rights abuses far larger than previously reported".<sup>1</sup>

That statement will come as no surprise to this forum; the Anti-Slavery Society has stated here annually its concern at the gross violations of human rights suffered by Burma's national minority peoples at the hands of the Burmese army and as a direct result of the policies of Rangoon.

There are currently over 20,000 refugees from the Karen people alone in camps in Thailand. They are there to escape atrocities, such as turning captives into human mine detectors, that are characteristic of Burmese military behaviour.

Four years ago, in June 1985, the National Democratic Front, the organisation of Burmese indigenous people, appealed to the United Nations Secretary-General and to ECOSOC to ensure that the Granting of Least Developed Country status be linked to the protection of human rights and the promotion of peace within Burma. Sadly the plea went unheeded and the military oppression continued after the LDC status was granted.

Two years later, Lord Listowel, the former Secretary of State for Burma at the time of independence, and a joint-president of the Anti-Slavery Society, said:

As a personal friend of the founders of Burmese independence, I have since followed with interest and sympathy its development as a new nation... Burma... is enriched by the presence of several minorities. A secure and prosperous future for all its inhabitants can only be assured by mutual respect between the Burmese majority and the minorities they rule for each other's basic rights.

Today Burma is bankrupt and the government of General Saw Maung has shown as little respect for social, economic, political and ethnic rights as his three, also unelected, predecessors. In fact the general's troops massacred some 3,000 civilians just twelve months ago when they were demonstrating for the restoration of democracy, and during the first ten days or so after the general's coup, a reported 1,000 people were killed. Perhaps as many as 10,000 people have been massacred altogether, though the true total will probably never be known. Most of those who died, like the 10,000 or so students who fled to territory in the control of the National Democratic Front, were drawn from the majority Burman people. Rangoon appears no longer to be oppressing the minority peoples alone.

Politicians such as the Canadian Jim Edwards and the American Senator Daniel Moynihan have called for the restoration of democracy and human rights in Burma and for an end to the atrocities. Some industrialised countries suspended their aid to Rangoon. However, the Anti-Slavery Society shares the indigenous population's sadness at Japan's resumption of aid and their alarm at its recognition of the present Burmese government.

It is perhaps this recognition that helped to give General Saw Maung confidence to arrest one of the leading opposition figures, Aung San Suu Kyi, for a short while in June. She, the general secretary of the National League of Democracy, was also nearly shot by an army officer three months earlier while campaigning in the Irrawaddy delta. Only the intervention of a more senior officer saved her.

Although Burma's military government has promised to hold elections next year, it is impeding any education in democratic procedures for a population that has not voted for three decades. All universities and schools were closed down last year (some primary schools re-opened two months ago), a night curfew is still in operation, people chanting political slogans risk military arrest and gatherings of more than five people are forbidden, political statements displayed outside party offices are banned and the country's two newspapers are government-controlled. Martial Law is still in force.

[ Another, newer, threat faced by the indigenous people is deforestation. The government recently announced that it will sell 180,000 tons of teak and 760,000 tons of other hardwood to 21 Thai timber companies. Most of the logging will be done in ethnic areas and the Shan and Karen peoples will be prominent among those earliest affected. They will suffer - and the pattern is familiar - by having decisions affecting their lifestyles taken without consultation, by having their land effectively invaded by foreign companies, and by the inevitable attack on their lifestyles and culture. The Society is not aware of any compensation having been offered, much less negotiated. ]

The Anti-Slavery Society regards it as significant that Thailand's own forest cover is now at the critical stage and that commercial timber felling has recently been stopped, that logging in Thailand traditionally has had strong links with high-ranking army officers there and that the Burmese military government first entered into a logging agreement with the Thai Supreme Commander, General Chavalit, last December.<sup>2</sup>

Also significant is the fact that last May Burmese troops entered Thailand and shelled a Karen camp which was highly defensible from the Burmese side. There was no 'diplomatic incident' afterwards, even though a Thai village had been destroyed.

Only in March this year, and in this building, the Commission on Human Rights noted that there were barriers to "the democratic aspirations of the Burmese people". Regrettably there still are.

#### Recommendations

The Anti-Slavery Society, while recognising the difficulties, nevertheless recommends that:

1. military oppression in all its forms be stopped;
2. indigenous peoples be consulted and treated as equals;
3. logging be accompanied by enforced re-afforestation and that UNDP/FAO be encouraged to plan, in consultation with indigenous peoples, a comprehensive forestry programme;
4. political parties be allowed to operate freely;
5. next year's general elections be supervised by the United Nations and that an undertaking be given that they will not be postponed;
6. freedom of the press be restored.

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<sup>1</sup> Dispatches. Channel Four television documentary, London 15 March 1989

<sup>2</sup> Dawn, March 1989, Bangkok