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[Ban must visit Burma to begin the end-game](#)

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[Chinese foreign minister, UN chief discuss Gaza conflict over phone](#)

Xinhua - 2009-01-11 14:49:12

[Karen rebels under the gun along Thai-Burma border](#)

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[Burma needs reform, unified and balanced structure](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 12 January 2009 15:29

[United Nations Worried Over Nigeria's Donation To Myanmar](#)

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[Junta struggling to keep state budget afloat](#)

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Mizzima - Friday, 09 January 2009 23:55

[Fall in rice price hurts Myanmar exporters, farmers](#)

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[Myanmar export through border trade increases in 11 months of 2008](#)

Xinhua - Jan. 7 2009

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Mizzima - Wednesday, 07 January 2009 19:44

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[**NCUB Plans to Form Parallel Government in 2009**](#)

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[**Nargis volunteer sentenced to 10 years imprisonment**](#)

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The Straits Times - Jan 6, 2009

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Irrawaddy - Tuesday, January 6, 2009

[**David Scott Mathieson: The world looks away as Burma mocks democracy**](#)

National Post - January 06, 2009

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[**Women's group call for investigation into girl's rape and murder**](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 06 January 2009 15:06

[**Ethnic veteran political leader Saw Mara Aung dies**](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 05 January 2009 22:46

[**UNICEF to continue polio vaccination program in Myanmar this year**](#)

Xinhua - 2009-01-06 13:07:17

[**Doomed US-built wartime road finds new life: China working to make use of route to India**](#)

Los Angeles Times | January 4, 2009

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Xinhua - 2009-01-03 13:59:35

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Mizzima News - Friday, 02 January 2009 12:50

[US backs democracy in Myanmar ahead of anniversary](#)

AFP – 3 January 2009

[Burma frees North Korean refugees](#)

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[Commentary: Unprincipled discrimination and dignity](#)

Mizzima - Thursday, 01 January 2009 23:25

[Burmese Migrants Earning, Learning in Thailand](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 31, 2008

[COMMENTARY: The Stories We Missed in 2008](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 31, 2008

[Fresh offensive on Thai-Burmese border](#)

Mizzima News - Friday, 09 January 2009 20:37

Chiang Mai – A fresh offensive has broken out along the Thai-Burmese border between ethnic Karen guerrillas of the Karen National Union (KNU) and a joint force of Burmese Army troops and those from the Karen splinter group Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), sources along the border said.

The offensive is taking place opposite the Burmese border in the vicinity Ohn Pyan village near the town of Mea Sot in Thailand's Tak province. Observers said the offensive could be an attempt by the Burmese Army and allied DKBA forces to occupy KNU controlled areas.

"The fighting has been continuing and they [the joint forces] have already occupied some of the KNU controlled areas. And with March 27 approaching, they are determined to take control over the rest of the areas," a source told Mizzima, referring to Burma's Armed Forces Day which falls on March 27.

According to military sources, Burma's army is also planning to cross into Thailand in order to execute a surprise attack against the Karen rebels.

[Ban must visit Burma to begin the end-game](#)

European Voice - 09.01.2009 / 13:03 CET

By Thaug Htun

A more active role by the UN's secretary-general is one of ways the international community can deepen its engagement with Burma's problems, argues the government-in-exile.

In backing a visit to Burma (Myanmar) by the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the EU's envoy, Peiro Fassino, in mid-December added to the clarion call for the UN to take a lead role in Burma.

The EU itself is already well engaged, via a range of economic sanctions. It has opened channels of dialogue on Burma with interlocutors like the Philippines. Just before Christmas it pledged a further €40.5 million to aid efforts inside Burma, focusing particularly on victims of the Nargis cyclone of last May.

But, the EU cannot enact positive change on its own. It needs concerted action from the UN, starting with a high-profile, top-level, well-focused visit by Ban himself.

Instead, the United Nations secretary-general seems to be waiting for a miracle before he is prepared to visit Burma. Like a scientist afraid of his own experiment, he aims to plot the result before he begins the process.

He is seeking, he says, an assurance that there will be an outcome. This is an untenable position, overly cautious by far for a situation as critical as the one in which Burma finds itself. The UN is willing to allow the Burmese military junta to ride roughshod over international standards of human rights, political practice, economic sustainability and foreign relations. The global body is allowing the regime to push on towards a sham election in 2010, which will inevitably bolster their power and defer the development of democracy in Burma.

While the shortcomings of the UN indicate a global system that is failing Burma, the UN is not alone.

Regionally, a virtual free-for-all has erupted as investors from China, Russia, Korea, Thailand, and elsewhere rush into Burma. A resources and energy assets boom has given the military regime an opportunity to open the flood-gates. Sanctions in place in the EU and the US have ensured Burma's neighbours have few serious competitors, or watchdogs.

A step-by-step plan

The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, as the legitimate and mandated *de jure* government in Burma has outlined a step-by-step plan for more focused and successful engagement with Burma.

The first vital and unavoidable step would be for the secretary-general to visit the country – and to do so as soon as possible. That would be an opportunity to present and embody the international community's concern over widespread human rights violations and the volatile actions of the country's rulers.

Second, the UN's special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, must go to Burma again to meet officials and to establish the infrastructure to: a) ensure the release of all political prisoners; b) facilitate open negotiations between Aung San Suu Kyi, the victor in Burma's last democratic elections, and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the name Burma's military regime has given itself; c) to set a permanent liaison office in Burma to pursue the direct intentions of the secretary-general and; d) to bring solutions to Burma's economic crisis.

Third, a process of on-going engagement needs to be rolled out. The generals need to be obliged to meet and engage appropriately with the UN special envoy and must grant all relevant UN officers unlimited access throughout the country.

Fourth, the UN should kick off a process of national reconciliation, capitalising on the work already done in this direction by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which I represent at the UN. This process must be inclusive of all opposition parties, the military and all ethnic groups. This must take place before the proposed elections in 2010 to head off the usual ruses employed by the generals in order to exploit international goodwill, to marginalise authentic opposition voices in Burma and to ensure the irrevocably flawed 2010 election can never take place.

Fifth, all such processes need to have the full-backing of the UN and have their agenda set by the UN. This needs the backing of the UN member states, who must stand up and act on Burma more than they are, and should be a priority as the run-in to the 2010 election looms closer.

Sixth, this process has to be fully open, the dialogue made public and the results known to all, so as to ensure full accountability and the good governance of the initiative.

These are concrete steps, not idle thoughts. Such a programme could bring progress to Burma. The international community understands these mechanisms and can work within them. And yet there is inaction, a sense the rhetoric is there to knit a veil for international leaders.

Recently, Ban said that the actions of the junta are “abhorrent and unacceptable” and called for “bold action” on the generals' part to move towards democracy. But, the words will sink quickly unless they are forcefully backed up by Ban himself.

This is not the time to be overly fastidious in the interests of protocol or realpolitik, or to protect the perceived dignity of the secretary-general's office. Our people are in grave danger.

We can only hope the EU will continue to provide weight to the growing movement to begin the process of lasting change in Burma.

Thaung Htun represents Burma's government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), at the United Nations.

[**Chinese foreign minister, UN chief discuss Gaza conflict over phone**](#)

Xinhua - 2009-01-11 14:49:12

BEIJING -- Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon exchanged views on the situation in the Gaza Strip over telephone on Sunday.

During the conversation initiated by the UN chief, Yang said the UN Security Council Resolution 1860 once again reflected the strong desire from the international community for an immediate ceasefire, the alleviation of the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, and the promotion of peace and stability in the region.

Yang stressed that the desperate priority should be the faithful observance of the resolution by all parties involved.

First, the immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip should be realized; and secondly, the humanitarian crisis should be mitigated as soon as possible while noninterference into the humanitarian assistance and security of the UN personnel should be feasibly guaranteed, Yang said.

Yang added that China would continue to make its efforts to ease the tension, alleviate the crisis and push for a ceasefire negotiation.

Ban expressed his complete agreement with Yang and said he would make a visit to Gaza shortly in hopes of ensuring the implementation of the resolution 1860.

Yang and Ban also exchanged views on other international and regional issues such as those of Myanmar and Sudan's Darfur.

[Karen rebels under the gun along Thai-Burma border](#)

Mizzima - Sunday, 11 January 2009 12:49

by Daniel Pedersen

Mae Sot – Burma's ethnic Karen rebels are facing another daunting challenge, as a Burmese military campaign designed to hunt out opposition forces and put an end to the world's longest running civil war is intensifying along a sliver of land opposite northwest Thailand.

The Sixth Brigade of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed-wing of the Karen National Union (KNU), is presently engaged in a desperate battle for survival near Thailand's mountainous Umphang region, south of the border town of Mae Sot.

Their base camp, which was a relatively new settlement once equipped with solar power, a medical clinic, potable water and fish holding tanks, has been razed to the ground by Burmese soldiers.

From a secret location on the Thai-Burma border, KNU Vice-Chairman David Thackerbaw said government soldiers were maintaining a "scorched earth policy" against not only the KNLA, but also Karen civilians.

The KNLA, waging the world's longest running civil war, has been battling successive Burmese regimes over six decades in a bid to win self-determination.

While the KNLA steadfastly maintains it has avoided casualties during the Burmese Army's latest offensive, its soldiers are now sleeping rough in dense jungle that provides a modicum of security under the cover of darkness. In the daytime they move.

Working alongside Burmese Army troops in the hunt for KNLA troops are soldiers from a splinter Karen faction, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The Burmese Army and the DKBA, working in tandem, are reportedly using Thailand as a launching pad for attacks because the terrain is more navigable and void of the danger of landmines.

The DKBA was established in 1994 following the bloody fallout between rival KNU and KNLA leaders; Buddhist commanders said to have upset over the perceived dominance of leadership roles doled out to Christians within the organization.

On the evening of Saturday January 3, 2009, the latest offensive by the Burmese Army and DKBA – reportedly consisting of more than 200 men – wrested control of the rebel base camp from the KNLA, who found themselves hopelessly outnumbered and forced to withdraw.

The camp had provided the only medical facility for more than 800 villagers clustered in two nearby settlements.

Also as a result of the latest offensive, more than 300 people, their homes reduced to ashes, are now

purportedly huddled under makeshift shelters, protected from marauding Burmese Army and DKBA troops by Thai soldiers.

On Sunday and Monday of the previous week, low-flying Thai military helicopters plied the skies between Mae Sot and the Umphang region, delivering reinforcements and materials to both border forces and the latest batch of refugees to flee the contested region.

In a nervy interview in Mae Sot last Tuesday night, the KNLA's Colonel Nerdah Mya said his base camp was in cinders and that he was heading back into this war's newest theatre on Wednesday in a bid to "put everything back together again."

"We have to find a new location. We have no location at the moment and are always on the move," expounded the Colonel.

Nerdah Mya, the son of recently deceased Karen leader Bo Mya, said about 20 DKBA and government soldiers had been wounded by landmines and that while some were being treated in the field, others had been sent to Umphang and Mae Sot hospitals for amputations.

However, he insisted the situation was not critical for his men.

"We have been coping with this type of situation for many years now, sometimes they send many soldiers to occupy the entire area, but if we keep moving we can get around them," Nerdah Mya added.

The KNLA's hold on the area has for years been tenuous at best.

The region in question, which surrounds a stretch of land between Thailand and Burma known as Phop Phra, is rich in minerals, including antimony and gold mines as well as zinc and tin deposits.

Taiwanese and Thai businessmen are constantly seeking to exploit the resources but are generally defeated by the fact that no matter which side they deal with, adequate security cannot be guaranteed.

The battle for control of this region began in earnest last year in late June, when torrential rains were still pounding the area almost daily. Since then Thailand's sovereignty has reportedly been repeatedly compromised by both DKBA and Burmese government troops.

At times the Thais have resorted to lobbing mortars at Burmese battalions whose stray shells have forced the evacuation of Thai villages.

Phop Phra was once home to one of Thailand's finest teak stands. It was logged by the KNU in decades past, when the organization was on good terms with Thai authorities and viewed as a convenient buffer force between Thai and Burmese troops. Now the region's red clay soil, utterly deforested, is home to fields of corn.

But the farmers who grow the corn to sell to Thai businessmen are now forced to pay taxes to both the DKBA and the KNLA for safe passage through their respective territories.

December and early January, regarded as the cold season along the Thai-Burmese border, is the best time to reap corn seed, which fetches a higher price than fresh cobs. However, much of the current crop figures to go to waste as the latest round of hostilities enters into its seventh month.

Sergio Carmada, a co-founder of the Italian non-governmental organization Popoli, which provided seed, ploughshares and motorcycles toward the KNLA's current crop and also helped fund Colonel Nerdah's destroyed base camp, previously offered his view of this war that began in 1948.

"In my opinion war for identity is not very popular around the world," stated Carmada.

"War for democracy is very popular. You can destroy towns and kill hundreds of thousands of people for that. For democracy you can kill everyone. For identity - it's not allowed anymore," he said.

A founder of the Free Burma Rangers, U Wa A Pa – a nom de plume of a former foreign soldier, disregards the DKBA as uneducated oafs who don't know what they are fighting for, or why.

He further agrees with the KNU's David Thackerbaw that the Burmese Army is employing a scorched-earth policy. He says the situation is even worse for inhabitants of western Karen state as compared with those nearer to Thailand, with villages and crops being constantly torched.

Free Burma Rangers provides medical support for villagers on the run from Burmese Army troops in remote areas.

"I think given a realistic option they [the DKBA] would change sides in a day", he said. "But they need to see that the KNLA can win. They want to be on the winning side."

But alas, today, a KNLA victory seems the most unlikely of scenarios.

Burmese Abbot's Birthday Draws Thousands to Thailand Celebrations

Irrawaddy - Friday, January 9, 2009

By WAI MOE

Tens of thousands of Burmese pilgrims crossed into Thailand this week to attend celebrations marking the 46th birthday of a monk who was once a close spiritual adviser of Burma's ousted prime minister and military intelligence chief, Gen Khin Nyunt.

Mongphone Sayadaw Ashin Bhaddanta Nanasamvara is now abbot of Wat Weng Kaew in Chiang Saen, on the banks of the Mekong River in northern Thailand. He moved there from Burma after the fall of Khin Nyunt in 2004.

His followers in Burma, mostly from Shan State, have been travelling in their thousands to Chiang Saen annually since 2007 to honor him on his birthday. The celebrations last about one week.

The Burmese pilgrims spend at least 5,000 baht (US \$143) travelling to and from Chiang Saen, some from as far away as Rangoon, an arduous journey of more than 1,000 miles, taking a week or more to cover.

The *Shan Herald Agency for News* said people from half of the 56 townships in Shan State travelled to this year's ceremonies, including well-known Shan traditional singers.

The Burmese abbot is also well known in Thailand, and many Thai Buddhists also attended the birthday celebrations.

Ashin Bhaddanta Nanasamvara was born in Thailand and when he was 11 he entered the monkhood at Mongphone Monastery in the Burmese-Thai border town of Tachilek, where he eventually became abbot. He returned to Thailand in 2004, after the fall of Khin Nyunt.

Khin Nyunt and other high-ranking military officers were frequent visitors at the monastery.

"Before Khin Nyunt was arrested and ousted from power, he came and paid his respects to Mongphone Sayadaw at least once a year," Sein Kyi of the *Shan Herald Agency for News* told *The Irrawaddy* on Friday. "High ranking intelligence officers and military were also among his followers at the time."

Sein Kyi said Kyaing Kyaing, the wife of junta head Snr-Gen Than Shwe, had tried to coax the abbot back to Burma.

Burma needs reform, unified and balanced structure

Mizzima - Monday, 12 January 2009 15:29

by Htet Win

Rangoon () Burma is in urgent need of mainstream political figures who are capable of shaping unified public opinion, which will allow the country to take up a really democratic direction in the future even after the proposed general election in 2010.

One such most prominent figure is no other than Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, inside Burma even though she is currently under house arrest and is not provided any legal or formal platform for the time being in domestic politic developments.

However in a country under military rule, the agent factor comes in again: Imagine the Lady on Rangoon's streets tomorrow, we will definitely see a changed scenario. No other elite can achieve that feat.

"No other elite can draw over tens of thousands of people coming out voluntarily, which means a lot," said an observer who is familiar with diplomatic circles in Rangoon.

That is the single agent that can shape public opinion and challenge the vicious structure. It is really amazing. We do not think yet that a future civilian-military government has solutions or ways to handle this agent.

"Principled" and "firm" politicians like the Lady and all those under 65-year, 88 Generation Students in prison persistently remain due to their sheer obstinacy, but the structure-agent question remains the same," the observer said.

He added that a "principled", "firm" and "obstinate" opposition is the need in 2010 backed by mainstream players, who are not supposed to be military-elite-friendly businessmen and some educated – now known as Third Force. (They do not claim themselves as the Third Force but as patriotic mainstream opposition)

If the Third Force is not playing a key role in real democratic progress and the mainstream players like the Lady and the '88 generation has got space to play, the country would be able to avoid another vicious circle.

The country has had such vicious circles relatively in a ten-year cycle. Examples include the 1962 military coup, the 1975 U Thant student-uprising, more student uprisings in 1988 and in 1996 and 2007 protest led by monks.

"Myanmar is highly expected to make an exit from those similar circles in history," the observer remarked, adding that new actors/agents or new circumstances were likely to emerge for a democratic transition in the country.

The military government must reserve space for those agents for domestic improvement, if it continues to claim that the country is moving towards democracy. It would be another big mistake for both the army and the country's future, if and when the military elites try to get rid of the opposition or make them surrender. It can never happen.

The Opposition is like any agent today, who is coming up with opportunities and challenges, both of which are already interlaced. The government and the governed including the Opposition – must face them, living up to their historical commitments. For instance - the military government's early 1990 declaration to transfer political power to a civilian government.

"The longer it takes to transfer power, the harder it will be for the military elites to find a political way out. That's because time makes the military elite offensive making them commit more and more mistakes

under the present structure," the observer said.

Political opponents – including present ones, the Lady and the '88 Generation Students – continue to be a thorn on the side not only for the military but also for new power broker elites. Politics is business. Or it should be understood as such. In a change, some lose and some win.

It is a waste of time and resource that the military government is pushing ahead to start a new age, which is in its favour. It is important not to lose sight of the "big picture," building an economically prospered democratic nation.

Many who pursue a pragmatic view can accept theoretical basics such as - emergence of an illiberal democracy, role of moderates in democratic transition, and democracy as an elite compromise.

To achieve a widely-accepted public opinion in Burma, opposition groups must continue to play a crucial role, which the military elites have found themselves unable to gain in history. Getting rid of the Opposition is killing the country's future and space for the military as well.

Public opinion – including national reconciliation and development of progressive agents – could be primarily through the efforts of the Opposition. A military government is found to lack "philosophy" for the development of the nation as a whole.

That's one good option to avoid future internal armed conflicts and/or instability in Burma.

[United Nations Worried Over Nigeria's Donation To Myanmar](#)

The Guardian (Nigeria) – 11 January 2009

From Laolu Akande New York

NIGERIA'S donation of a whopping \$500,000 to the military junta in Myanmar few weeks ago is raising questions at the United Nations Secretariat in New York. An official of the Presidency arrived New York two days to Christmas to deliver the check at a hurriedly put together bilateral meeting between the Nigerian Ambassador, Prof. Joy Ugwu, and her Myanmar counterpart at the UN building.

But for the invitation to few members of the UN press, the event would have passed unnoticed and branded a secret deal. Even Nigeria's former Foreign Affairs Minister who is a UN's top official on Myanmar was not aware of the donation. A source at the Nigerian mission disclosed that even top Nigerian diplomats at the UN could not explain the transaction any better than, that the whole affair was an "order from the headquarters (Abuja)."

Professor Ogwu only said that the money was Nigeria's own contribution to the "ongoing relief efforts in the country, following the devastation caused by cyclone Nargis in May 2008," in Myanmar.

But observers are however wondering why Nigeria's own contribution came some six months after the tragedy and why a presidency official had to be specifically detailed to deliver the cheque instead of any of the senior Nigerian diplomats in New York. The other question is why the Federal Government chose to make the money directly available to the Myanmar government when the UN had set up a special fund to warehouse international donations to help victims of the Myanmar cyclone.

Media reports quoted Ambassador Joy Ugwu as saying UN Special Envoy on Myanmar, Nigeria's Professor Ibrahim Gambari had no role to play in the donation. Gambari's office at the UN also confirmed this saying he "had no prior knowledge of this transaction or the motive, if any, on the part of the Nigerian Government," adding however that Professor Gambari does not object to the donation

A reporter with Inner City Press in New York, Lee reported that, "Nigeria gave its money directly, in US dollars, and apparently with no requirement to report back on how the funds are used. This is the type of hard currency for which Senior General Than Shwe is desperate." He wrote that Nigeria would be seen to be supporting a military dictator by making such a donation "with no strings attached."

On the other hand, some transparency and accountability on how the money would be spent would have been possible had the money been donated through the United Nations. When contacted for comments, a top Nigerian diplomat simply said the Foreign Affairs Ministry wanted the money to be handed over to Myanmar directly.

Why Nigeria would seek to please one of the few remaining military tyrannies in the world is an issue that baffles many at the UN. A retired top Nigerian diplomat who had represented the country at the UN said it is simply shocking that Nigeria would do such a thing without passing through the normal diplomatic channels of the United Nations, since it was the UN that had called for international support to Myanmar.

The Abuja dole is coming at a time when the UN and the global community are telling the Myanmar military dictator to move faster with democratic reforms. For instance, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon has postponed plans to visit the place and there are no scheduled visits in the foreseeable future by the UN Special Envoy Gambari, who has been working round the clock to advance democratic reforms in Myanmar.

Ki-Moon said last month at the UN that he was "disappointed by the unwillingness of the government of Myanmar (Burma) to deliver on its promises for democratic dialogue and the release of political prisoners."

By donating half a million bucks to Myanmar and doing it without the knowledge of the UN, Nigeria may be indirectly courting the enmity of those in the international community who are insisting that an iron hand be applied on the Myanmar dictatorship. The timing of the donation according to a source is also an indication, of "bad planning" by the Foreign Affairs Ministry in view of mounting international opposition against the military junta in Myanmar.

One report said that there are as many as 112 former heads of state and government from more than 50 countries urging the UN secretary to help to secure the release of all Burmese political prisoners by the end of the year 2008.

Led by Kjell Magne Bondevik, the former prime minister of Norway, the group told Ki-Moon that, "If the Burmese junta continues to defy the United Nations by refusing to make these releases by the end of the year (2008), we urge you to encourage the Security Council to take further concrete action to implement its call for the release of all political prisoners."

The Federal Government of Nigeria made its donation of half a million dollars to Myanmar less than two weeks after these world leaders called for Security Council action against the Myanmar dictatorship.

What is more, the White House, last month, issued a statement urging the international community and the United Nations not to remain silent to oppressive, anti-democratic measures of the Burmese junta. The statement by Press Secretary Dana Perino, said "Brave Burmese patriots such as Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, and Htay Kywe were among those who have been sentenced to 65 years imprisonment for their peaceful participation in the August 2007 protests, in which Burmese citizens, including monks and activists, called on the regime to address the basic needs of the Burmese people."

At the donation on December 23, Prof Ugwu said Nigeria took the "opportunity to express our unflinching solidarity with the government and people of Myanmar for the concrete actions being taken to address the situation"- referring to the cyclone tragedy. There are also those who see the gesture as part of Nigeria's support of the South to South Integration at the UN, which seek to encourage stronger ties among the less developed countries of the world.

[Junta struggling to keep state budget afloat](#)

Mizzima - Sunday, 11 January 2009 12:44

by Moe Thu

Rangoon – Experiencing increased pains related to the global financial crisis, Burma's military government is struggling to maintain a solvent state budget, seemingly exploiting every option available to them, such as the introduction of a pre-paid phone system and further state-run auctions.

"Given the measures of the military government, they are apparently absorbing cash from the general public, which is adding to the woes of poor cash flow among public trading activities," said a retired professor from the Rangoon Institute of Economics.

Only last month, a pre-paid cellular phone system was introduced, attracting many customers.

"These days, public voices over stagnant business, from street vendors to large-scale exporters, are getting louder," added the professor, who declined to be identified.

He said many items normally intended for export – like seafood and agricultural produce – have instead flocked into the already suffering local market.

He also said revenue from natural gas, primarily exported to Thailand, is declining – as prices of crude oil have fallen under US \$50 a barrel in the world market.

"Decreased energy prices are symbolic of reduced economic activities," he said.

Additionally, the military government is facing a limited supply of raw gems, reduced extraction possibilities the result of aggressive extraction over the past few years in previous attempts to service the country's cash-strapped budget.

The supply of Burmese rubies dropped to 1.5 million carats in fiscal year 2007-2008 from 2.3 million carats in 2004-2005, according to government statistics; while sapphire decreased to 308,642 carats in 2007-2008 from 1.088 million carats in 2003-2004.

"These [the gems] are not just decreasing in quantity, but in quality also," the professor said, adding that the real situation signals the sector's decreasing reliability as a means of revenue.

Yet, to counter pains from the ongoing financial crisis, Burma's military government has limited options. However, one such proposed course is the plan to maintain the construction sector by contracting for new projects in the country's nascent capital of Naypyitaw.

For example, the government has recently revealed that the development of a prototype of a countrywide geographical profile map is beginning around Naypyitaw, utilizing a model scaled at 1: 60 kilometers.

"The government hopes that the multi-million dollar project will provide job opportunities for general workers who are in dire straits, increasingly suffering from economic hardship," the professor said.

However, he iterated that most infrastructure projects are politicized on purpose, not really for the sake of the general populace, but more in a move to make an impression on the public.

[Visitation rights denied to families of political prisoners](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 09 January 2009 23:55

by Than Htike Oo

Chiang Maing – Family members of political prisoners have had to return from journeys to remote prisons without ever having a chance to meet with those detained, a result of the latest hardship brought against political prisoners by Burma's ruling military.

In one example, the Myitkyinar prison authority in Kachin State only informed visiting family members of noted comedian and film director Zargana on the 2nd of this month about a ban on prison visits by family members during the current month.

"They said that the ban is for all political prisoners, but only for this month. Apart from that, they said nothing. The higher authorities ordered them to do so, they said," Tayza, elder brother of Zargana, told

Mizzima.

The decision greatly inconvenienced family members in Rangoon, who instead of spending at least 120,000 kyat (approximately US\$ 100) for return airfare, opted to take a train to the northern city, a journey of some three days.

The popular comedian is serving a 59 year prison term for multiple charges, including committing disaffection towards the state and government by using the Internet.

Similarly, family members of Sports Journal editor Zaw Thet Htwe and 88 generation student female leader Nilar Thein, who are serving their prison terms in Taungyi in Shan State and Thayet prison in Pegu Division, respectively, have had to return home without meeting their loved ones.

Thai-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners – Burma (AAPP-B) Joint-Secretary Bo Kyi said that such a ban on visits by family members of political prisoners is but the latest punishment leveled against those already wrongfully imprisoned.

"This is giving extra punishment to these political prisoners without reason. They didn't commit any crime in the prisons. It seems personal grudges against these political prisoners is behind the ban on allowing meetings with their family members during prison visits," Bo Kyi said.

During monk-led protests in September 2007 in Rangoon, Mandalay and other major cities, protesters requested the government to enter into a dialogue with the opposition in the hope of putting an end to twenty years of political stalemate inside the country.

However, military authorities instead responded with the arrest of Buddhist monks, students, human right activists and National League for Democracy (NLD) party members in connection with the demonstrations, subsequently sentencing them to long prison terms in the final months of 2008 before sending them to remote prisons in Shan, Kachin and Rakhine States.

According to statistics compiled by AAPP-B, the junta has handed down sentences to a total of 410 political prisoners, of which 146 are monks, 126 women and 138 men. In all, the organization lists 2,137 political prisoners being held in prisons throughout Burma.

[Fall in rice price hurts Myanmar exporters, farmers](#)

Reuters - Fri Jan 9, 2009 2:36am EST

By Aung Hla Tun

YANGON - The fall in world rice prices is hurting exporters in Myanmar, who say they are shipping grain at a loss, and is adding to the problems of poor farmers struggling to recover from Cyclone Nargis.

"A tonne of our 25 percent broken rice now fetches only \$250 in the international market," one rice exporter told Reuters.

"With a 10 percent deduction for export tax, we get only \$225 per tonne, compared with about \$260 a tonne we had to pay in the domestic market a few months ago," the exporter said, asking not to be identified.

Vietnamese 25 percent broken rice, an Asian benchmark, was quoted at around \$335 per tonne this week. Rice from Myanmar is generally of inferior quality because of poor milling. The main buyers are Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and African countries.

After a bumper harvest in Myanmar, a tonne of 25 percent broken rice in the domestic market now costs

around \$230.

That's a little better for exporters but not much good for farmers, who say they are selling below cost price, with the result that some are being forced off the land.

"With soaring costs for inputs and labour, and falling rice prices, it's no longer commercially viable for us to grow rice," farmer Ba Tin from the cyclone-hit Kawthmu Township said, adding some farmers in the region had lost their land to private firms.

Army-ruled Myanmar earned \$100 million from exporting 358,500 tonnes of rice in fiscal 2007/2008 (April/March) -- a fraction of what it sold in its heyday as the world's largest rice exporter, before independence from Britain in 1948.

In its best year, 1934, when it was called Burma, it exported 3.4 million tonnes. Thailand, today's top exporter, shipped around 10 million tonnes last year.

Myanmar had stood to benefit from a jump in world prices and a panic about supplies in 2008, when some big exporting countries restricted sales to ensure their people had enough to eat.

In February 2008 it agreed to sell 300,000 tonnes a year to Bangladesh.

But then Cyclone Nargis struck in May, and the generals banned rice exports from that month to preserve stocks.

Officials say the ban was eased from July and government data shows Myanmar exported 127,600 tonnes worth \$43 million in the first seven months of the fiscal year from April to October 2008. Around 101,000 tonnes was sold in April, before the cyclone.

EXPORT DRIVE

Prices have since collapsed. Thailand's benchmark 100 percent B grade white rice traded at \$550 per tonne this week, barely half the record high of \$1,080 seen in April 2008.

Sein Win Hlaing, secretary general of Myanmar's Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, said the export market was being liberalised to help the sector. Trade has until recently been controlled by exporters close to the junta.

"We do realise the grave consequences of plunging rice prices. We have relaxed some restrictions to forge the export drive. Small-scale exporters are being allowed," he said.

But economists said problems were piling up.

"Falling rice prices in the world market are only partially to blame. The main thing is we have to cut costs for the growers. We need to provide them with soft loans and subsidised inputs," said a former Yangon University economist, declining to be named.

The fall in domestic prices is not all bad news, though, with many people in Yangon relieved at cheaper food.

"After Cyclone Nargis we were worried that rice prices would go up," food stall owner Kyaw Myint said. "Now I'm very glad to be able to sell steamed rice to my customers, all in the lowest income bracket, at very low prices." (Editing by Alan Raybould)

[Demarcation of Maritime Boundary](#)

The Daily Star – 10 January 2009

'Settle disputes, create separate ministry to protect sea territory'

The new government should attach high priority to settling disputes over demarcation of maritime boundary with India and Myanmar to avert any aggression by external forces, said the experts on sea resources and academics yesterday.

They advocated for creating a separate ministry to protect the sea territory of Bangladesh and fully utilise the sea resources saying that the country's maritime territory, which is around two lakh square kilometers, has so far been remained unused for the disputes.

They made the observations at a press conference organised by the National Committee to Protect Bangladesh's Maritime Territories and Resources at the National Press Club in the capital.

"To settle the maritime dispute, the primary task of the government will be to conduct surveys on the sea claimable by Bangladesh as per the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)," said Commodore (ret'd) Khurshed Alam, member-secretary of the national committee.

He said Bangladesh may lose the control of its own maritime territories if it fails to make primary claims on the basis of UNCLOS to the UN by 2011.

Bangladesh's Territorial Water & Maritime Zones Act of 1974 was not scientific, he said, adding, "This act should be amended in accordance with the UNCLOS."

Khurshed said the negotiations with Myanmar and India have not been effective since long and this caused conflicts with the two neighbouring countries.

In 1974, Bangladesh allowed six oil companies to explore gas and oil in the Bay, but India intercepted them. Again in 2005, Bangladesh declared 28 blocks in the Bay for oil and gas exploration, but India and Myanmar objected to it.

On the other hand, India and Myanmar have claimed that most of the 28 blocks belong to them and want to establish their claims in various ways.

India has already leased two disputed blocks to international oil companies.

Recently, Myanmar brought their ships in the disputed territory in the Bay creating tension between the two countries.

It is apprehended that Bangladesh will lose a large chunk of maritime territory and will not be able to claim any continental shelf if the claims made by Myanmar and India on the delimitation of maritime boundary are accepted.

"Bangladesh should follow equity policy unlike India and Myanmar which are following equidistance policy in the delimitation of maritime boundary," said Khurshed in his keynote presentation.

Prof Anu Muhammad said neither the state nor the think tanks or the media have any comprehensive idea about the country's huge sea resources resulting in the current situation.

"Delimitation of the maritime boundary is very important for our resources, waterways and after all our sovereignty," he said, adding that sea resources are much more than land resources of Bangladesh.

Prof Serajul Islam Chowdhury said the issue of maritime boundary must be discussed at length in parliament so that all can become aware of it.

"Huge sea resources should not be allowed to be grabbed by others for our mistakes," he added.

Justice Golam Rabbani, engineer Sheikh Muhammad Shahidullah and Dr Akmal Hossain also spoke at the press conference chaired by engineer M Inamul Hoque.

[MYANMAR: Failure of international community before drama of Burmese people](#)

AsiaNews - 01/10/2009 13:33

Pascal Khoo Thwe, a Burmese dissident, adds up the balance of a tragic 2008: Nargis and the military dictatorship have pushed the population to the breaking point. The junta has deliberately allowed people

to die in order to confiscate their land. He stresses that the struggle for democracy must begin with the people.

<http://www.asianews.it/files/img/MYANMAR - pascal.jpg> Yangon () - For most Burmese, 2008 will be remembered for "an apocalypse by the name of Cyclone Nargis" that devastated the country, "and the year the international community headed by the United Nations thoroughly failed" in the face of the emergency and the drama of the refugees, incapable of touching the power of a military dictatorship that "represses any voice contrary to the regime" in blood. The charge comes from Pascal Khoo Thwe, a Burmese activist of Padaung ethnicity, exiled in London, in an editorial published on the website of the dissident newspaper *Democratic Voice of Burma*.

He recalls how last May, the world was "waiting for the arrival of the biggest Olympic Games ever to be held" in China, and too preoccupied "not to do anything which could upset the striding dragon that is China" to think of the tragedy afflicting Myanmar. The situation was intensified by the neglect of the ruling junta, which did not take into consideration the alarm raised by a meteorological center in India, considering Nargis on the level of a simple tropical storm.

"The more people the storm killed," Pascal Khoo Thwe writes, "the better for the generals as no one could blame them for it and they could seize the prime lands of the people who perished." Many of the victims were of Karen ethnicity, a minority that the government has repeatedly tried to eradicate by force from the region.

He does not spare criticism of foreign governments, which "'urged', 'denounced', 'condemned' and 'demanded'," but did nothing concrete to change the situation and help the Burmese people. At the same time, he blasts the UN policy of "wait and see," while "hundreds of people were dying day by day."

The repression imposed by the military rulers also impacts those - few, in reality - who have promoted personal initiatives to help the populations and areas ravaged by the passage of the cyclone: Pascal Khoo Thwe cites the example of the most famous Burmese actor, Zarganar, who was "stopped, assaulted, and intimidated by agents of the junta," and finally "arrested and imprisoned for his efforts." He also tells about a farmer - the only survivor in his family - who, a few weeks after the catastrophe, reprimanded a volunteer with a foreign NGO, telling him: "Thanks for nothing and for coming too late. Keep on helping tyranny." "The farmer disappeared without a trace and nobody knows what happened to him." He also recalls those who "have courageously fought against the dictatorship for years, like Win Tin," a leading representative of the opposition party National League for Democracy, who seem to have "wasted their energy" without the international community providing them "any concrete help" or ceasing "to support the generals" in power.

For the future, Pascal Khoo Thwe does not seem to be on board with the wave of optimism that has accompanied the election of U.S. president Barack Obama. It is not a matter of distrust, justified among other things by many of his predecessors who never kept their promises, but a question of political realism. "Obama has too many things on his plate to sort out as the most powerful leader on earth, such as the mess in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel/Palestine and the global economic crisis, to name but a few. I would advise my countrymen that we should not pin our hopes on events abroad." He urges that "we must all stop mentally depending on foreign powers . . . and go beyond the politics of emotion." "We must stop our reliance on a magic bullet formula in politics, by really listening to the concerns of those at the grassroots level." Otherwise, there will be a repeat of the slaughter, massacres, and natural disasters on an even more devastating scale, which can be avoided only if the people are capable of facing the future "with less anxiety and emotion." "The history of Burma," he concludes, "has shown that good ideas or actions or foreign support alone are not enough to govern or rebuild a nation and maintain its soul."

Nowhere to Hide

Irrawaddy - Friday, January 9, 2009

By JAMES FORREST

They are constantly running and hiding from the Burmese army. One 62-year-old Karen man said he believed he had fled in fear more than 100 times in his life. They build makeshift shelters in the jungle wherever they can and plant fields that might never see a harvest. With only the clothes on their backs

and a few tools in their hands, they build schoolhouses from bamboo and try to give their children an education. More than anything, the Internally Displaced People (IDPs) of Eastern Burma try desperately to keep a candle of hope burning in their hearts.

It is extremely difficult to reach IDPs in conflict areas. Humanitarian aid from NGOs and the UN World Food Program working in Burma does not stretch to the people of Karen, Karenni and Shan states who require it the most.

The IDPs of Eastern Burma rely on cross-border aid and intrepid groups such as the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) and the Back Pack Health Worker Teams to deliver it. The logistics are very difficult and the conditions are hazardous. With the dreaded Burmese army, or *tatmadaw*, controlling checkpoints on all roads, FBR teams must stick to jungle trails and use mules and porters for transportation.

It is a dangerous occupation. FBR teams have had eight members of staff killed since they set up 10 years ago. The *tatmadaw* often operates a shoot-to-kill policy in areas where villagers previously lived and regularly plant landmines around the villages to deter them from returning.

FBR teams travel into the most remote regions of Eastern Burma, as well as in ethnic areas in the west of the country to help IDPs with supplies of medicines, mosquito nets, blankets, tarpaulins and clothing. Sometimes, the vital aid is supplemented by organisations, such as the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People or the Karen Office for Relief and Development, but is not enough to meet the desperate needs of the internal refugees.

Naw Eh Moo Paw, 30, from Thong He Der Village in Karen State, told FBR: "My brother was 14 years old when the *tatmadaw* attacked our village in 1997. We all ran away, but he was not with us at the time and was too young to know how to react. He ran the wrong way—toward the Burmese soldiers. They shot him dead. When I think about him, I am sad. I want to defeat the *tatmadaw*, but I cannot. And so when they come, I have to run away."

Some 48 full-time FBR teams are in operation around the country. The volunteers are homegrown—drawn from the communities they serve—Arakan, Lahu, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Pa-O, Shan and Karenni ethnic groups. FBR teaches the volunteers how to navigate safely around the areas where they operate, how to interview people and record their stories, and about international human rights. They learn how to cross rivers with ropes and how to disarm landmines. Some are selected to be trained in medicine where they learn to treat the most common illnesses they come across, including acute respiratory infections, malaria, anemia and skin diseases. Some 50,000 people—essentially IDPs—are treated by FBR teams every year.

FBR says its teams bring hope, help and a message of love to the IDPs. One volunteer medic said, "I work with FBR because I want peace." Another said, "I have known about the relief teams since I was a little boy and I decided to help our people as best I can."

It appears the FBR and the Back Pack teams' tasks will be ongoing—everywhere the IDPs set up home, the Burmese army reacts by hunting them down, attacking them, burning their villages and abusing them. Several organizations have recorded the staggering amount of human rights abuses, killings and rapes that are perpetuated by soldiers of the Burmese army against ethnic villagers in Eastern Burma, but no one seems able to prevent them.

One young villager had this message: "We never think about going to the refugee camps on the border, because we want to live in our own country. Tell the Burmese regime to put a stop to the oppression, so we can move back to our homes and live in peace."

James Forrest is a volunteer who works with displaced people in Burma.

Top Bush Aide Hopes Obama Will Push Burmese Cause

Irrawaddy - Thursday, January 8, 2009

By LALIT K JHA WASHINGTON — A top aide to US President George W Bush said on Wednesday that he hoped the incoming administration of President-elect Barack Obama would continue to push for democracy and protection of human rights in Burma.

"I hope the new administration will continue pushing the cause of human rights and freedom in Burma," said Bush's national security advisor, Stephen Hadley, in his valedictory speech at the prestigious Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank.

During its eight years in power, the Bush administration led the international community in imposing sanctions on the Burmese military regime and calling for the restoration of democracy and release of all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi.

Although it was not able to achieve any of these objectives, the Bush administration was successful in putting Burma on the agenda of the UN Security Council.

First Lady Laura Bush also took a strong interest in the people of Burma and often encouraged the administration to take measures against the country's ruling junta.

Since becoming the president-elect, Obama has remained largely silent on foreign policy issues. Although he and his team have occasionally expressed their views on critical foreign policy issues, they have said nothing so far on Burma.

[Global Crisis Hits Junta's Pockets as Gas Prices Fall](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, January 8, 2009

By WILLIAM BOOT

The Burmese military government's lucrative income from selling natural gas abroad is likely to suffer dramatically from falling prices triggered by the global financial crisis, an expert on the country's economy has predicted.

Income from gas sales—mostly to Thailand—has already slumped in the first nine months of the current financial year, the Burmese Ministry of National Planning and Development disclosed this week as it announced the latest import-export trade figures.

The ministry said gas exports, which account for about 40 percent of all export income, fell 28.5 percent in value between April and December—a loss of US \$670 million compared with the same period a year earlier.

At the same time the cost of imports rose, resulting in a 39 percent drop in trade surplus.

But economist Sean Turnell, a professor at Australia's Macquarie University who specializes in monitoring Burma's economy, said the situation is likely to get worse in the coming months.

"These numbers likely underplay the effects of the global financial crisis on Burma's export revenues for the full financial year, since only part of the reported period includes the steep dive in international commodity prices and demand since November," he told *The Irrawaddy*.

"Extrapolating this trend until the end of March will deliver a fall in the trade surplus for the full year of about 55 to 60 percent."

However, losses from gas sales will most likely hurt the military leadership more than Burma's ordinary citizens, Turnell says, because much of the revenue from the country's natural resources goes into weapons or is spent on grandiose projects of little or no benefit to the population.

"The ruling regime has little understanding of the dynamics of a market economy, and mistakes the building of roads, bridges and dams and other physical infrastructure as constituting economic development," Turnell said in a recent report for his university's *Burma Economic Watch*.

Burma's large natural gas reserves offered an opportunity for the country to lift itself off the economic floor where it was already languishing before Cyclone Nargis hit.

But Turnell said gas is turning into a "resources curse" for Burma.

"Burma's gas earnings are already causing problems. Almost invisible in the country's public accounts, so far they seem to be earmarked for the type of wasteful and grandiose spending projects that have been a characteristic of Burma's military regimes for nearly five decades."

Almost 50 percent of households in Burma were in debt before Cyclone Nargis devastated the country's core rice and fishing industries.

Despite Burma's gas and likely oil resources, agriculture still accounts for 47 percent of gross domestic product.

The military regime's insistence on providing loans at 17 percent to thousands of farmers who needed new seed and equipment after Nargis has added to the indebtedness, and in many cases will sustain a cycle of permanent debt and poverty.

Providing interest-free grants is the "normal option taken in the wake of natural disasters by governments elsewhere," noted Turnell.

"Burma's state is almost wholly predatory, and is not so much parasitic of its host as all consuming," he added.

[Report on post-Nargis recovery plan to be released in Myanmar](#)

Xinhua – 8 January 2009

YANGON -- A post-Cyclone Nargis recovery and preparation plan report, worked out by a Myanmar-ASEAN-UN tripartite core group (TCG), will be released at the end of this month in Myanmar, the local Biweekly Eleven journal reported Thursday.

The report on recovery and natural disaster preparedness programs to be implemented over the next three years from 2009 to 2011 covers that on agriculture, construction, education, health, environment and sanitation, natural disaster response, the journal said, adding that these programs will involve local and international non-governmental organizations.

In July last year when it was nearly three months after Cyclone Nargis, Myanmar, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations released a post-Nargis joint assessment (PONJA) report, saying that the total damage and losses due to last May cyclone storm in Myanmar was estimated at 4.4 to 4.5 trillion Kyats (4.02 to 4.13 billion U.S. dollars).

The report preliminary indicated that recovery need was at over one billion dollars over the next three years.

Of the total need, 90 percent are at community level which were targeted in the areas of agriculture, housing, community villages infrastructure.

The PONJA report was produced after a 10-day survey on 291 villages in 30 cyclone-worst-affected townships in two divisions of Ayeyawaddy and Yangon, involving over 250 experts.

In November last year, a TCG high-level roundtable was held in Yangon to review the post-Nargis relief and recovery efforts in the country, attended by Myanmar Deputy Foreign Minister U Kyaw Thu, who is also TCG chairman, Bishow Parajuli, United Nations Resident Humanitarian Coordinator, representatives of TCG members and donor countries as well as foreign diplomats.

The roundtable, which was the second, reported the progress of activities that the TCG had embarked on immediately after the assessment phase.

The TCG, based in Yangon, was established at the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference in Yangon late May as a working mechanism for coordination, facilitating and monitoring the flow of international assistance into Myanmar's cyclone-hit areas.

Cyclone Nargis, which occurred over the Bay of Bengal, hit five divisions and states -- Ayeyawaddy, Yangon, Bago, Mon and Kayin on May 2 and 3 last year, of which Ayeyawaddy and Yangon inflicted the heaviest casualties and massive infrastructure damage.

The storm killed 84,537 people and left 53,836 missing and 19,359 injured, according to official death toll.

Regional Perspective: Understanding new Thai policy towards Burma

The Nation - January 5, 2009

AFTER EIGHT YEARS, it will not be easy to undo the Thai foreign policy towards Burma initiated by the Thaksin-led government and its nominees. A complete overhaul of the Burma policy is out of the question. However, some major shifts by the current government could be forthcoming that would firm up bilateral ties and strengthen Bangkok's voice on Burma within Asean. Additional principled guidelines, drawing from the Asean Charter, are imperative aimed at supporting the international community's effort to promote an open society there.

Gone quickly would be the preponderance of one-man decisions on key policies, especially those dealing with cross-border security, investment and trade cooperation.

In the past few years, Thailand has been rather compromising in its security considerations in exchange for economic benefits, which often went to individuals rather than the country as a whole. In particular, from 2001 to 2006, the Thai side allowed the Burmese side greater leeway along the 2004-km border such as issues related to Burmese migrant workers, illegal cross-border activities and harassment of minorities and Burmese exiles.

Picking up the pieces of Burmese policy where the Democrat-led government left off in early 2001, this time around the Thai foreign policy will be decided in a transparent way without any hanky panky as in the past. Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya said succinctly that from now on, Thailand will deal with Burma in a straightforward manner without any dubious deals or transactions based on "four-eye meetings", which was the trademark of Thaksin's personalised diplomacy.

Prior to the return of the Democrat-led government, Thai-Burmese relations were very superficially closed, representing no real national agenda. Thai leaders were myopic, deluded in thinking that defending the Burmese regime within Asean and the international community would help them win favours from the junta leaders and subsequently secure the country's future energy and natural resources need. Indeed, the energy dependence on Burma was exaggerated to justify Thailand's closer ties with Burma, including its passivity.

Throughout the year 1999-2000, before Thaksin came to power, the Burmese people's struggle for democracy and open society was at its peak with all the support of the international community. Asean was far more united as far as peer pressure on Burma was concerned. Thailand dutifully played the leading role on Burma throughout by bringing in the international community. Former foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan, currently the Asean secretary-general, pushed Asean to engage in enhanced dialogue with Burma as well as emerging transnational issues affecting the region.

However, soon after the arrival of the Thaksin-led government in early 2001, Thai policy towards Burma turned upside down. After a few weeks of border tension and tough talks on Burma's role on cross-border illegal drugs trade, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra unexpectedly softened his Burmese policy, much to the chagrin of the international community. Since then, Thailand's credibility on Burma has disappeared.

During the Cambodian conflict, Thailand's role in Asean as a frontline state was well recognised as it was pursued based on the region's interest, not tempered with vested personal interests. Asean helped to internationalise the conflict playing out at the UN continuously for nearly a decade, which gave Asean an international voice, before the Paris peace agreement in 1989. In Burma's case, it was the opposite. Thailand failed miserably to assert itself in the Asean overall approaches albeit it was the most affected by the Burmese growing oppression. Bangkok's willingness to play second fiddle to Burma further divided Asean and stymied broader cooperation with international community.

Subsequent revelations by Surakiart Sathiratai, foreign minister in the Thaksin government, showed that investment and commercial deals with Burma at that time were not honest as they were coaxed with conflict of interest.

The scandal over the Export and Import Bank of Thailand's Bt4-billion loan to the junta was just one example. Like rubbing more salt into the wounds, former prime ministers Samak Sundravej and Somchai Wongsawat made ridiculous remarks defending Burma.

Samak was the most embarrassing as he praised the military junta leaders as peace-loving leaders and boasted about their closed friendship. Under the Surayud Chulanont government (2006-7), Thailand maintained a strict policy of no new contacts or improvement of existing ties.

Burma could have made a transition to democracy if the Thai governments in question had not indulged in personalising, nationalising and making the Burmese problem bilateral. The leader's personal and group interests linked to Burma weakened not only Thai credibility, it also belittled Bangkok's voice within Asean. That helps explain why in the absence of a Thai role, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have become more pro-active in shaping the grouping's views and positions on Burma.

Coming to power at this juncture poses serious challenges to both Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and Foreign Minister Kasit on Burmese policy. They have to revitalise and synergise the role of Thailand, Asean and the international community to move the situation in Burma forward.

At present, the Asean Charter, imperfect as it is, will serve as a useful tool to encourage reluctant Asean countries to get more involved on issues of human rights and democracy. The rumblings over the charter's ratification in Indonesia and Philippines were indicative of the strong desire for such endeavour.

As the Asean chair, Thai leaders will adopt a comprehensive strategy on Burma that put together various parts and needs from within region. Furthermore, this strategy must also work in tandem with the current international efforts, especially through the offices of the United Nations and related agencies and its special envoy.

After all, the Burmese quagmire is not the problem of any particular country or regional community.

It must be kept at the multilateral level so that all stakeholders can work together to end the current impasse and sufferings.

NGOs Question Thai Government Freeze on Migrant Registration

Irrawaddy - Thursday, January 8, 2009

By LAWI WENG

A Thai government decision to suspend registration of new migrants for one year has come under fire from Thai non-government organizations.

Sompong Srakaew, a director of the Labor Rights Promotion Network (LPN), based in Mahachai, Samut Sakhon province said the decision, prompted by rising unemployment in Thailand, was discriminatory.

Jackie Pollock, a founding member of the Thailand-based Migrant Assistance Programme (MAP) said some officials feared that Burmese migrants, if registered, might not return home because of the deteriorating economic situation in Burma.

The Thai government freeze on new registrations might lead to exploitation by employers, Pollock said.

A commentary in the English-language daily *Bangkok Post* on Thursday said most migrant workers preferred to "remain underground, thus keeping the human trafficking rackets alive and well with support from corrupt police."

Instances of police corruption in dealing with non-registered migrants are common.

Nai Jon Dae, a Mon migrant in Mahachai, claimed unregistered Burmese migrants pay the police 300 baht (US \$8) a month to work unhindered. Some are asked to pay 1,000 baht (\$28) in spot checks.

Min Zaw, a Burmese migrant working on a rubber plantation in southern Thailand, said he and his wife paid a total of 2,600 baht (\$74) a month to the police.

According to the Thai Labor Promotion Network, about 76,000 Burmese migrants are registered to work in Thailand, while about 224,000 migrants are waiting for registration.

It is estimated that more than 2 million migrants work in Thailand, only about 500,000 of whom are registered.

Burma's economic woes, inflation and unemployment drive an increasing number of Burmese to seek work in neighboring Thailand, and the flow of migrants was boosted still further by Cyclone Nargis.

In April, 54 Burmese migrants suffocated to death while being transported in a container truck from Ranong, near the Burmese border town of Kawthaung, to the Thai resort island of Phuket.

Although the tragedy prompted officials to step up efforts to stem the tide of illegal migrants into Thailand, Burmese continue to make the trip in a desperate bid to find jobs to support themselves and their families.

[BURMA: Home to 50 million forgotten consumers](#)

The Nation - January 8, 2009

By Eric Rosenkranz

I was having dinner with an old friend recently. As we were going through our usual casual conversation about everything in general and nothing in particular, he asked me, "Eric, what is the largest untapped market for consumer goods in the world?"

I scratched my head, mentally browsing all the continents and made a few (wrong) guesses.

My friend told me: Burma.

With an estimated population of 50 million, squeezed between the two fastest-growing economies in the world (China and India) and kept artificially poor by 50 years of debilitating government policies, Burma's consumer goods market is ready to explode.

As we read news about Burma we always hear the same sad but true story: a fairy tale democratic icon set in deadlock with a horrible dictatorship ... and with no solution in sight.

Here is some other news about Burma: this is a country where live not only 200 generals and one Lady, but also 50 million ordinary people, 50 million consumers who have developed very similar consumption habits to their neighbours in Thailand.

A quick visit to Mingalar Zay, the main wholesaler's market in Rangoon, will make you wonder whether you are in Burma or in Thailand. Many brands - local as well as international - familiar to Thai consumers are part of the Burmese people's everyday life.

My friend, who started the Burma operation of a UK-based multinational company in 1993, witnessed firsthand the positive impact of an investment by a large company: creation of quality jobs, improving the life of local people, and setting up of new standards that in turn positively influenced the government's behaviour.

"Our employees," he remembers, "were all paid in the top quartile, had performance bonuses, medical insurance, extensive training, and career development opportunities including overseas secondment and financial support to study for further qualifications."

When, under the pressure of pro-sanction campaigners, this company pulled out of Burma in 2003, "life changed again for my local colleagues, but this time not for the better".

It is not the intention of this article to engage in a debate of the effectiveness of sanctions, nor is it appropriate to suggest that anyone act against the laws of any country. However, for a business inclined to consider a new marketplace, there are plenty of opportunities for regional and international companies to develop or strengthen their business in Burma.

Who are these consumers?

There are about 10 million households in Burma and this number is increasing fast as the number of persons per household (currently slightly above 5) is decreasing rapidly as lifestyles modernise.

Thirty per cent of the population is urban and 50 per cent of the non-rural population lives in Rangoon and Mandalay.

The population of Burma is very young, with 45 per cent below the age of 19.

The average disposable income per household in Rangoon and Mandalay is between US\$150 (Bt5,230) and \$200 per month.

A recent ranking on brand awareness shows that only two foreign brands made it into the top 20.

Modern trade is emerging and growing fast: Rangoon and Mandalay count no less than 30 well supplied supermarkets.

"The conclusion is simple," says Luc de Waegh, founder of West Indochina (WIC), a consultancy dedicated to increasing the consumer-goods businesses in Thailand and Burma.

"There is enormous potential for growth. It is still affordable to build up brands and establish a position for the long run in this market, which is bound to catch up with its Thai neighbour. Total media spend is estimated at less than US\$20 million per year (less than 1 per cent of media spend in Thailand)."

Depending on product categories, current consumption per person is 10 to 30 times lower than Thailand today.

"Year on year growth rates of 25 - 40 per cent are common," adds de Waegh.

What is a company to do, if it is interested in expanding into Burma but wants to do so by following legally and ethically appropriate standards? Here are some tips from WIC:

1. Identify the right partner. Stories of partnerships that went horribly wrong are legion but there are outstanding exceptions. A low profile is a key to success in Burma and the best partners are not always the loudest
2. Choose the most appropriate legal structure. It is possible to operate a business to international standards - you just need to know how.
3. Select the best manufacturing option. The less you import, the better off you are - Burma is rich in local resources.
4. Hire an efficient distributor. A stable supply chain is a key to success; some distributors have established reliable logistics systems, some are even investing in good-standard trade marketing/merchandising.
5. Get the best advice regarding your communication campaign. The cheapest option is not always the best - but the best option is still very cheap.

Doing business in Burma is certainly not plain sailing but in these difficult economic times, what company can afford to ignore the potential of 50 million untapped consumers?

Eric Rosenkranz is the CEO of e.three, a Singapore-based consulting firm. For more information about doing business in Burma, visit www.westindochina.com.

[Presuming a democratic Myanmar: Looking beyond election 2010](#)

Jakarta Post - Thu, 01/08/2009 10:36 AM

Nehginpao Kipgen, , Rockville, MD | Opinion

It is sad to see a government sentencing its own citizens to prison terms ranging from six months to 65 years. The alleged convicts are none other than some of the most admired artists, revered monks and peaceful activists who dearly love their country.

The international community's political rhetoric, without any substantive action, has emboldened the military generals to advance their seven-step road map toward a "disciplined and flourishing democracy" slowly but steadily.

It was not surprising to see UN chief Ban Ki-moon's lukewarm reaction toward a largely symbolic petition submitted to him by 112 former world leaders asking him to visit Burma (Myanmar) in the wake of widespread arrests in recent weeks and months. The Dec. 3 petitioners included Jimmy Carter and Tony Blair, among others.

Out of frustration, Ban -- through his spokesperson Michele Montas -- responded to the letter and said: "...will not be able to do so without reasonable expectations of a meaningful outcome, which is what we have been saying all along..."

What could that paper tiger achieve anyway? Had the same letter been sent by the same number of incumbent world leaders, it would have had better leverage. The move was an encouraging sign, but will have very minimal impact, if any.

It would be more efficacious if the 112 world leaders instead convinced their own governments to take pragmatic action in line with what the UN chief is asked of.

It is the UN Security Council that can initiate effective action and the good offices of the Secretary-General that can implement, and not vice-versa. Ban Ki-moon sees the limitations his good offices can play in the absence of any enforcement mechanism.

If Ban were to go to Myanmar without having to achieve any substantive results, he could demean the Secretary General's office. His basic demands such as the release of political prisoners and an initiation of dialogue with the opposition groups have not materialized.

Instead of listening to the repeated calls for the release of political prisoners, the military authority -- in recent weeks -- has handed down long prison terms to anyone seen to be a disturbance in the upcoming 2010 election.

On the other hand, the military was sending yet another clear message to the international community. Senior General Than Shwe was heard bragging about the 15-year existence of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and its rising 24.6 million members.

On the fourth day of the association's 15th anniversary on Nov. 29, Gen. Than Shwe was heard saying: "...plans are well underway to see to the remaining steps including the 2010 transition work program. So, it is fair to say that the future of the State structure is certain to materialize".

In the new constitution, 25 percent of the seats in both houses of parliament (House of Representatives and House of Nationalities) are reserved for the military. Amendment of the constitution will require the approval of more than 75 percent of the votes. In other words, the constitution has been designed to perpetuate military rule.

The generals learned a lesson from the 1990 general election -- any free and fair election will go in favor of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other democratic opposition groups. It remains to be seen whether the NLD will be allowed to participate in the election.

If the NLD is barred from the election or if the party chooses not to participate, the political scenario beyond the 2010 election could become even murkier. While the new government will be busy with its own agendas, the NLD will continue to lobby the international community to recognize the 1990 election results.

The 2010 election will bring a transition to Myanmar, but the new government will still be directly or indirectly under the military. One other significant implication is that the results of 1990 general election will become bygone history.

As usual, the international community will send mixed responses regarding the election outcome. While most western nations will not or perhaps will reluctantly recognize the results, many Asian governments will welcome it as a positive step toward democracy.

It is these conflicting approaches that have given the military generals political breathing space. Sanctions versus engagements and or appeasements by the international community are responsible for the military regime's survival.

One must not, however, believe that the successful implementation of the State Peace and Development Council's seven-step road map will bring an end to Burma's decades-old political problems.

We will continue to see simmering political turmoil in the country. The military generals are indifferent to and even anathema toward any concept of federalism, which has been the basic demand of the country's ethnic nationalities -- with the exception of the Myanmarese.

A long-lasting solution to Myanmar's problems needs the sincerity, honesty and participation of all ethnic groups. Different ethnic groups should be brought into confidence, and their legitimate demands should be examined. This process of democratization has to be an inclusive approach.

Myanmar's political landscape could still be dramatically changed before and after the 2010 general election provided that the international community steps up a coordinated "stick and carrot" approach.

Meanwhile, the military junta's capability should not be undermined. The regime takes pride in having one of the largest armies in the region with over 400,000 personnel. The military is also well protected by the UN Security Council's veto structure.

If the international community is serious about finding a solution to Myanmar's political problems, it should take actions that can make a difference. There are ways to bring down or convince the military generals.

Military intervention, a model based on the six-party talks regarding North Korea's nuclear stand-off and the UN Security Council Resolution will be some of the swiftest, if not most effective, tools to bring about a democratic change in Myanmar. However, none of the above is likely to happen in the near future.

If no realistic action is on the agenda, the international community should look beyond the 2010 election and start planning for new policies and strategies to be pursued under a new military-controlled government.

The writer is the General Secretary of U.S.-based Kuki International Forum (www.kukiforum.com) and a researcher on the rise of political conflicts in modern Burma (1947-2004).

[Myanmar steps up tight bio-security against cross-border bird flu](#)

Xinhua – 9 January 2009

YANGON -- The Myanmar authorities have stepped up tight bio-security against cross-border bird flu, banning poultry import from neighboring Bangladesh, the local Biweekly Eleven reported Friday.

Bio-security check is also being carried out at the Maungtau border point in prevention against mixing of home-breed poultry with migratory wild birds which are moving into Myanmar in the cold season especially at this time, the report said.

The Livestock Breeding and Veterinary Department (LBVD) has called on the country's people to take preventive measures against cross-border bird flu, saying that the avian influenza was found occurring intermittently in neighboring countries in both the east and northwest and attributing the phenomena to have been caused by the migratory birds, carriers of deadly H5N1 virus from one place to another.

Migratory birds from different regions across the world used to fly over Myanmar territory during the winter season period between November and February, according to experts.

The authorities have also called for keeping awareness about the modes of infection of the avian influenza and intensifying precautionary and educational measures to prevent any occurrence in humans and birds.

Meanwhile, Myanmar is cooperating with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in prevention against avian influenza.

In April last year, the World Animal Health Organization (OIE) declared Myanmar as a bird-flu-free country three months after the country was proved that there was no residual bird flu virus remained over the period since January.

From February 2006 until the last in December 2007, there were numerous outbreaks of the avian influenza in Myanmar covering 25 townships of six states and divisions.

All of the occurrences were blamed for infecting from abroad especially that the virus was carried into the country by migratory birds from the cold regions in the world infecting local birds, according to the LBVD.

Myanmar reported outbreak of the avian influenza in the country for the first time in some poultry farms in Mandalay and Sagaing divisions in early 2006, followed by those in Yangon division in early 2007, in Mon

state's Thanbyuzayat and western Bago division's Letpadan in July and in eastern Bago division's Thanatpin and in Yangon division's Hmawby in October the same year.

Despite the declaration as a bird-flu-free country, the Myanmar livestock authorities continued to call on the country's people to exercise a long-term precaution against the deadly H5N1 bird flu.

[Humanitarian crisis in Chin state likely to escalate in 2009: NGO](#)

Mizzima - Thursday, 08 January 2009 22:24

by Salai Pi Pi

New Delhi – With crop yields declining due to severe weather conditions and the devastation caused by rat infestation, a humanitarian crisis is imminent for western Burma's Chin state in 2009, a leading humanitarian worker in Chin state said.

Joseph Win Hlaing Oo, director of the Rangoon-based Country Agency for Rural Development in Myanmar (CAD), on Thursday said the humanitarian crisis in Chin state caused by both drought and rat infestation in 2008 is far from being over.

"This year, the situation seems to be getting worse," Joseph told Mizzima, adding that people have already begun running short of food.

"People will need more help," iterated Joseph, whose organization with help from the World Food Programme (WFP) has begun distributing aid supplies to a few villages in Chin state.

On Thursday, CAD began distributing about 700 rice bags to villagers affected by drought and rat infestation in Hakha township, home to the capital of Chin state.

Since the end of 2006, food security in the region has been gradually threatened by the infestation of rats, which are multiplying in great numbers after consuming a special bamboo flower that blossoms only once every 50 years in Chin state.

"Today, we started distributing rice bags to the people in four villages, including Pinam in Hakha township," Joseph said.

But he said aid is not simply given, with villagers instead receiving aid in exchange for community work, such as assistance in the construction of roads to connect villages, under a program called "Food-for-Work".

"We provide rice to villagers according to the work. We give [a total of] 100 bags of rice to 18 people on completion of a mile of road," said Joseph, adding that the 'Work-for-Food' model was utilized to help villagers get the best out of aid supplies.

Joseph said CAD intends to reach at least 30,000 people in three townships - Hakha, Thangtlang and Matupi – with aid supplies. However his initial plan of distributing aid last November was derailed due to difficulties in purchasing good quality rice and high transportation cost.

Additionally, he said aid supplies are still insufficient, as many more villages in other parts of Chin state, including those that are close to the Indo-Burmese border, are yet to be covered. According to him, the food crisis is far more severe along the Indo-Burmese border.

"The problems in the areas close to the India-Burma border are more serious than other areas," said Joseph, with the crux of the problem being a lack of proper roads and means of transportation to reach those areas.

According to an assessment done by the WFP and other relief agencies such as CAD, KARET, World Vision and Karuna Myanmar Social Service (KMSS), at least 60,000 people from 139 villages in Chin state are severely affected by food scarcity caused by rat infestation.

In 2008, the WFP coordinated a relief aid program to help victims in Chin state with 1,451 tons of rice through international and local relief agencies, Joseph said. He added that an additional 800 million kyat (approximately US\$ 600,000) will be made available for the first six months of 2009.

Meanwhile Van Lian Thang, spokesperson for the exile-based Chin Humanitarian and Relief Committee (CHRC), recently said people from at least 16 villages in northern Chin state are facing food insufficiency as the harvest of crops such as maize and paddy has fallen sharply.

"Because the rate of crops harvested this year is very low, people from some villages in Tedim and Falam townships are facing a shortage of food," said Van Lian Thang.

[Burma's fight against polio continues](#)

Mizzima - Thursday, 08 January 2009 21:07

by Solomon

New Delhi - With the help of donations from international organizations the Burmese Health Ministry said it will administer polio vaccinations to more than 7 million children across the country.

An official at the Burmese Health Ministry in Naypyitaw said the project to eradicate polio from Burma is supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO), Japanese Committee for UNICEF (JCU) and Japanese Committee for Basin (JCB).

"The Government will provide the health workers and the tools," the official elaborated.

The official, who is also a medical doctor, said the project will target at least 7.23 million children under the age of five in 325 townships from all across the country within a period of two months. The vaccine itself will be available on two days - January 10 and February 7.

In 2003, authorities declared Burma as a polio free country. But in 2007 a wild polio virus was discovered in Bhuthitaung and Maungtau townships of Arakan State in western Burma, leading to the vaccination in November and December of the same year of around 7 million children.

"According to the situation we have been given polio vaccinations and we cannot be sure when the vaccination will again be available, as it depends on funds," added the official.

The campaign will cost at least US\$ 5 million say authorities.

According to the official, authorities initiated a polio free campaign in 1989, but it was not until 2003 that it could be announced that Burma was a polio free country. However, the disease has since again found fertile ground in Burma.

In 2008, Burma was included in the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) worldwide top ten list of poor health care systems.

The MSF report said Burma's military government used only 0.3 percent of the country's gross domestic product for health care, amounting to only US\$ 0.70 per person in 2007.

HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria are said to be the primary killer diseases in Burma.

[Boat with 193 foreigners stranded off Aceh, Indonesia](#)

Reuters - Wed Jan 7, 2009 3:18pm IST

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia - A wooden boat carrying 193 people, thought to be from either Bangladesh or Myanmar, was found stranded on a tiny island off Aceh in northwest Indonesia, a police official said on Wednesday. The passengers, all male, were found on Wednesday morning on Sabang island. Several of them were in weak condition and 80 were treated at local hospitals.

"There are 193 men who claimed they have run away from conflict in their country. The local government has already taken the sick to nearby hospitals," said Farid Ahmad Saleh, spokesman for the Aceh police, adding that the rest are at Sabang naval base.

The foreign ministry said it was still trying to verify their origin. (Reporting by Oki Tiba; Writing by Olivia Rondonuwu; Editing by David Fox)

[New party distributes manifesto among Arakanese for 2010 election](#)

Narinjara News - 1/7/2009

Pauk Taw: A new political party the Amyo Thar ye party, National party, has distributed some pamphlets in Burmese regarding its party policy among Arakanese people for the 2010 election, said a village elder from Pauk law Township.

"Three strangers came to our village last week and distributed many pamphlets among the villagers. They told us to read the pamphlets carefully and study the party policy. One day the party leaders will visit the village to explain the party policy in relation to the 2010 election," he said.

In the pamphlets most of the content has to do with the 2010 election.

"The party explained through the pamphlets why it has decided to contest the 2010 election . It is the only way to democracy in Burma, the pamphlet says," the elder said.

The party seemed to be pro Burmese military junta because they can move in the villages freely without any hindrance.

.According to local sources, the people came to Pauktaw Township from Sittwe, the capital of Arakan state, to distribute the policy pamphlets for 2010 election.

The so called Amotha Ye party may be led by pro SPDC's Aye Lwin group which was formed in the name of 88 generation students.

A political source from Sittwe said that two political groups United National Party (UNP), known as Tasanya, and Amothr Ye Party are now mobilizing people from Sittwe to join the two political outfits.

Some educated and middle class wealthy people in Sittwe are reportedly considering joining the party hoping for business opportunities.

The United National Party which was formed by former Burma Socialist Programe Party (BSPP) members has started its organizational work in Arakan and some people in 17 townships in Arakan are reportedly selected in the township level committee.

In Sittwe, the issue of the 2010 election is being discussed among the people and some politicians are waiting for an opportunity to form political parties to contest the elections. #

[Rampant deforestation in Arakan by Burmese Army](#)

Narinjara News - 1/7/2009

Kyauk Taw: Forests in northern Arakan state located near southern Chin State are being depleted due to illegal felling of timber from the area by the Burmese Army, said local reports.

The local timber companies are felling timber from many mountain ranges in northern part of Kyauk Taw Township, an area located in southern Paletwa Township in Chin State for a long time after bribing army officials.

In some mountain ranges in areas like Mi let wa, Min Thar daung and Pe Chaung taung, timber companies have cut timber illegally without permission of the forest department.

The report said, army authorities from Sakhaka, known as Military Operation Planning Bureau, 5 based in Kyauk Taw gave permission to the timber companies to fell timber from the area reasoning to the local people that the income from timber companies are for army funds.

However, local people strongly believe that the income from timber companies are not for army funds but it is for army officials own consumption, the report said.

Many mountain ranges in the northern part of Kyauk Taw Township are now faced with denudation of forest cover because of rampant felling of trees.

The report said, many local people from Sapa Sit, Teen Nyo, Thet ratapin, Nyung Pin Hla have worked in the timber felling leading to deforestation in the region.

According to local reports, many army battalions stationed in Arakan state have been felling timber from nearby forests to sell in local markets for their respective battalion funds. As a result deforestation in Arakan state has become widespread.

[Soldier's Arrest for Transporting Drugs a Sign of the Times](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, January 7, 2009

By MIN LWIN A warrant officer from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 701, based in Hmawbi Township, Rangoon Division, was arrested for drug trafficking in late December, according to a source close to Rangoon Regional Military Command.

"He was not selling, he was just a carrier," said the source. "He did it because he couldn't support his family on his salary."

The man was found to be in possession of the drug while going through a checkpoint on the main road from Rangoon to Mandalay, the source said. No further details about the type or quantity of the drug were available.

The arrest highlighted a growing problem among low-ranking members of Burma's 400,000-strong armed forces. Unlike the top generals who use the military to maintain their hold on power in the country, most rank-and-file soldiers are struggling to get by.

"Regional military authorities don't provide sufficient rations and other supplies for soldiers and their families," said a sergeant from LIB 701, speaking on condition of anonymity. "That's why soldiers are always looking for some other way to support their families."

While many military families try to subsist on earnings from a variety of side businesses, from raising livestock to making bricks or wooden furniture, even this extra income is often not enough. Like other public servants in this impoverished country, many soldiers survive on the spoils of petty corruption and other illegal activities, including drug trafficking.

Non-commissioned members of the armed forces are paid less than half as much as junior officers, with monthly salaries starting at 21,000 kyat (US \$16) for a private. First class warrant officers can make as much as 50,000 kyat (\$40) per month.

"We earn small salaries and work six days a week, even though we are not on the frontlines," said the sergeant from LIB 701. "We don't care where we get our money from, as long as we can support our children."

With such attitudes prevalent among lower-ranking soldiers, commanding officers often look the other way or engage in illegal activities themselves. When caught, however, soldiers often face harsh sentences for their crimes.

Unlike soldiers near the bottom of the military hierarchy, those close to the ruling generals rarely face serious penalties for breaking the law.

Last year, Aung Zaw Ye Myint, son of Lt-Gen Ye Myint, was briefly detained at the Wat Htee Kan military camp in Prome, Pegu Division, after Burmese police raided his office at Rangoon's Yetagun Tower on May 29 and found illegal drugs and six guns.

The Wat Htee Kan camp has served as a sort of reform school for the miscreant sons and grandsons of top-ranking generals since Burma's socialist era.

Aung Zaw Ye Myint was a familiar figure in Rangoon's elite circles, mingling with movie stars and the children of other top generals. He was well known as a reliable source of hard-to-find street drugs for a small but well-connected clientele.

[Myanmar export through border trade increases in 11 months of 2008](#)

Xinhua - Jan. 7 2009

YANGON -- Myanmar's export through border trade amounted to 666 million U.S. dollars in the first 11 months of 2008, an increase of 10 million dollars from the same period of 2007 which registered 656 million dollars, local media reported Wednesday, quoting the Ministry of Commerce.

The export volume was up due to increased export of agricultural produces and forest products which accounted for 355 million dollars and 75 million dollars respectively, the 7-Day News said.

However, the export of animal, marine and mineral products declined during the 11-month period, it added.

There are 13 border points where Myanmar is trading with four neighboring countries -- Thailand, China, India and Bangladesh.

According to other local report, Myanmar's foreign trade volume hit over 8.5 billion dollars in the first three quarters (April-December) of the 2008-09 fiscal year, up 21.95 percent from the same period of 2007-08 when it registered over 7 billion dollars.

Of the 8.5 billion dollars' foreign trade, 7.5 billion dollars were gained through normal trade, while over 1 billion dollars were obtained through border trade, up 24 percent and 8.32 percent respectively.

Of the three-quarter period's foreign trade, the exports amounted to over 4.5 billion dollars with normal trade and 500 million dollars with border trade, increasing by 14.3 percent and dropping by 2.88 percent respectively.

Of Myanmar's export items during the period, beans and pulses took over 900,000 tons in quantity, getting 500 million dollars, while rice accounted for 200,000 tons, earning 60 million dollars.

Under the current status, Myanmar is trading with over 80 countries and regions through normal trade with Thailand standing top as Myanmar's trading partner traditionally without change, followed by India.

As export to China and its special administrative region of Hong Kong reached over 700 million dollars, China as a whole is likely to take up the second position in Myanmar's exporting countries to replace India for the entire 2008-09 ending March, commerce officials predicted.

Currently, China is standing the 7th among the top-ten countries with which Myanmar is mainly trading.

[Mizoram bans poultry and animal imports from Burma](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 07 January 2009 19:44

by Salai Pi Pi

New Delhi – India's northeastern state of Mizoram has banned import of livestock and poultry from Burma as a precaution against bird flu virus spreading to the state, which has a long and porous border with military-ruled Burma.

Dr. Sai Ngura, Joint-director of Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Department of Mizoram state on Wednesday told Mizzima that the Mizoram government since January 1, had prohibited import of livestock from Burma and Bangladesh to prevent the spread of the deadly H5N1 viruses, which are often detected in both countries.

"It was a precautionary measure along the border with Burma and Bangladesh where bird flu has been detected over the last two years. The flu occurs because these two countries are not well organized like India," Dr. Sai Ngura said.

The ban on import of animals and poultry in Mizoram came after the deadly virus was reportedly detected in neighbouring state of Assam in November 2008.

"After the bird flu outbreak in Assam state in November, we took preventive measures in our borders," Dr. Sai Ngura said, adding that the Mizoram government has sealed all borders including state and international boundaries from import of bird and other poultry products including eggs.

However, a local resident of Saiha district in Mizoram said despite the ban, poultry products such as chicken and eggs from Burma are continuing to be sold in the local market.

"So far, chickens from Burma are still selling in the local market in Saiha," the local said.

But Dr. Sai Ngura said, while chickens and poultry products that were imported earlier are allowed to be sold, new imports have been effectively banned and that the ban will continue until further notice was given by the central government.

"The ban will continue until the central government directs us to lift it," he added.

Mizoram shares a porous border of 404 kilometers with Burma's northwestern Chin state and with the people sharing almost a similar culture, language and custom, there is regular cross border interaction including trade and interactive human relationships.

In the second week of December, authorities culled around 200 chickens in poultry farms near Burma's new jungle capital city of Naypyitaw, after detecting a new disease among chicken.

Burma's ministry of veterinary and animal husbandry believes the symptoms to be of a new and strange disease known as Viscero Tropic Velogenic (VVNT), where the chicken or birds died of pain in the neck.

But some experts said it is a symptom of the deadly avian flu.

[Rangoon's Christians banned from worshipping](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 07 January 2009 21:34

by Mungpi & Phanida

New Delhi - Christians in Burma's former capital of Rangoon find themselves in a precarious state as local authorities on Monday banned the holding of regular church services and threatened to seal off churches if congregations failed to comply.

The Kyauktada Township Peace and Development Council on Monday summoned a meeting of local church pastors from leading downtown Rangoon churches and informed them to stop the conduct of worship services in residential apartments.

"They [the authorities] warned us that our churches would be sealed off if we continue worshipping," said a pastor of a church in Pabedan Township who attended the meeting.

The pastor, who requested anonymity for fear of reprisal, told Mizzima that nearly 50 church leaders and pastors who attended the meeting were made to sign more than five papers of pledges concerning the cessation of church services.

"The papers also said that we could be punished [and could be jailed] if we fail to obey the order and the church would be sealed off," the pastor said.

When contacted by Mizzima, an official at the Kyauktada Township Peace and Development Council office confirmed a meeting was held on Monday but declined to further elaborate on the substance of the ensuing dialogue.

However, according to the pastor, authorities sent an invitation to representatives from over 100 churches, mostly located in the downtown Rangoon area, and informed them of the new order.

"We received the meeting invitation last Sunday," said the pastor. "Now we don't know what to do with our Sunday services."

Burma's military authorities had long stopped issuing permits to religious organizations and churches for the possession of land and the building of churches, forcing several local churches in Rangoon to conduct worship services in residential apartments, which are often rented or purchased in the names of private owners.

"Since the late 1990s authorities have stopped issuing permits [to churches] to purchase land or construct church buildings," the pastor said, adding that he himself bought an apartment in Pabedan Township for use as a place of communal worship.

According to church leaders including the pastor, there are at least 100 churches located in residential apartments in downtown Rangoon, including those in Kyuaktada, Lanmadaw, Latha, Pabedan, Bothathaung, Minglar Thaug Nyunt, Dagon, Tamwe, Hlaing, Kamayut, Ahlone, Sanchaung and Bahan Townships.

A Christian youth in Rangoon in an email message to Mizzima said the order virtually puts a stop to Christians worshiping, as most churches in Rangoon are convened in apartments.

"Eighty percent of the churches in Yangon [Rangoon] are included in the order. Only a few churches have their own land. Most churches use rented buildings, houses and office style rooms for worship places," the youth explained.

"We need your prayers for Christian communities in Myanmar [Burma]," the youth added.

While religious persecution and the prohibition of religious rites are not uncommon in military-ruled Burma, the new order, according to another pastor, is an attempt to stop Christians from regularly meeting.

In September 2007, Burma's military junta, in its determination to suppress the people and sustain their rule, violently crushed Buddhist monk-led protests, killing what opposition sources say were hundreds of monks, a highly revered population in the predominantly Buddhist country.

NCUB Plans to Form Parallel Government in 2009

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, January 6, 2009

By WAI MOE

The National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), an umbrella organization of Burmese opposition groups, announced on January 1 that it will found a parallel government as part of its action plan for 2009.

In a special New Year statement, the NCUB said that it would establish a "National Unity Government" and "National Unity Parliament" to counter plans by Burma's ruling military regime to hold an undemocratic election in 2010.

"As a tactic to challenge the junta's legitimacy, we will form a parallel government," Nyo Ohn Myint, a member of the NCUB's Foreign Affairs Committee, told *The Irrawaddy* on Monday.

He added that plans to create a new government would go into effect after a forthcoming conference of the Members of Parliament Union (MPU), a group consisting of MPs elected in Burma's last election in 1990. The MPU's annual conference is scheduled to take place on January 19 in Dublin, Ireland.

Nyo Ohn Myint added that the parallel government will include both elected MPs and representatives of ethnic groups who have their own territories and armies.

The NCUB statement has excited controversy among Burmese exiles, many of whom question the value of forming a new parallel government when the democratic opposition already has a government in exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB).

The NCGUB was formed by exiled MPs elected in 1990 and is led by Dr Sein Win, the cousin of Burma's detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Founded in December 1990 in Manerplaw, the former headquarters of the Karen National Union, the NCGUB now operates out of Washington, DC.

Nyo Ohn Myint denied that the new National Unity Government would function in the same manner as the NCGUB, saying that it would not merely consist of a prime minister and five cabinet ministers like the NCGUB.

He also questioned the NCGUB's leadership because of its failure to cooperate with the NCUB's efforts to challenge the Burmese junta's seat at the United Nations.

Responding to criticism about its effectiveness, the NCGUB accused the NCUB leadership of embarking on a meaningless campaign without any attempt to form a consensus among members of the umbrella group.

Khun Marko Ban, the NCGUB's federal affairs minister and a member of the MPU, said that the NCUB's secretary-general, Maung Maung, did not even inform all concerned parties before issuing the New Year statement.

"Even though I am an executive member of the NCUB, I knew nothing about the statement until after it was released," said Khun Marko Ban, who is also President 3 of the NCUB.

"We need to respect the organization's consensus principle and ensure that this does not happen again," he added.

The NCUB was formed in September 1992 by four organizations: the MPU, the ethnic-based Democratic Alliance of Burma, the National Democratic Front, and the National League for Democracy (Liberated Area).

Khun Marko Ban said that at its last conference in February 2008, the MPU initiated reforms that would make the NCGUB more proactive in the future. The MPU, which elects the NCGUB's cabinet, will choose a new lineup at the conference in Dublin, he added.

[Pro-junta group announces formation of political parties](#)

Mizzima News - Tuesday, 06 January 2009 22:13 New Delhi (Mizzima) - A pro-junta group, the 88 generation students (Union of Myanmar), has said it is all set to contest the upcoming 2010 general election as drawn up by the ruling junta.

Aye Lwin, a former 88 generation student and leader of the group, said they will have two parties to contest the election, believing the process could set Burma on the road to political reform, though democracy in Burma will admittedly require more time to evolve into a mature and stable political institution.

"We will have two parties to contest the election," Aye Lwin told Mizzima on Tuesday. While he will be leading the National Political League (Union of Myanmar) as its chairman, the 88 generation students (Union of Myanmar) will be led by other former students who participated in the 1988 general uprising.

"We are waiting for the announcement of the Election Law and specifics regarding the registration of political parties," he said.

Aye Lwin added that the election is the only way forward for Burma, which has remained in a virtual political stalemate for the past 20 years.

"We have begun campaigning in at least six divisions and three states and will continue with it," commented Aye Lwin, a former Rangoon Institute of Technology student and a colleague of detained student leader Min Ko Naing during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising.

Aye Lwin, who later switched political stands and criticized fellow student leaders and the mainstream opposition movement, including Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party, said he believes that democracy can be best and earliest achieved through the junta's roadmap.

Meanwhile, NLD spokesperson Nyan Win said his party has not yet decided on whether or not to contest the upcoming election, saying, "We would like to first observe the situation."

The NLD and other opposition groups have condemned the junta's roadmap and criticized the constitution as a tool to cement military rule in Burma.

Reporting by Salai Pi Pi

[Nargis volunteer sentenced to 10 years imprisonment](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 06 January 2009 22:10

by Myint Maung

New Delhi – An individual arrested while undertaking volunteer relief services for victims of Cyclone Nargis was yesterday sentenced to ten years imprisonment by a court in Rangoon's outlying district of South Dagon.

Khin Maung Win (29), a resident of South Dagon Township, yesterday at approximately 2 p.m. was sentenced to ten years imprisonment with hard labor, having been found guilty of establishing an unlawful organization and undertaking an illegal border crossing.

"Ko Khin Maung Win was given five years under an unlawful organization case and another five years through the Immigration Act, totaling ten years", Rangoon lawyer Nyi Nyi Hlaing, who is familiar with this case, told Mizzima.

An eyewitnesses heard Khin Maung Win reciting a poem written by 88 Generation student leader Min Ko Naing, 'I'll plant the fighting peacock flag on the classroom walls', as he was boarding a prison van to take him back to Insein prison following the sentencing.

Khin Maung Win is a member of the anti-junta organization 'New Generation' and was arrested on the 10th of October last year while acting as a relief campaign volunteer in storm ravaged areas of the country. Cyclone Nargis, which struck Burma on May 2-3 of last year, left around 140,000 people dead or missing.

Previously, Khin Maung Win worked in Malaysia and was forced to return illegally to Burma after losing his passport abroad.

"Most Burmese citizens who lose their passport return to Burma illegally. But only Ko Khin Maung Win was punished because of his political activities," Nyi Nyi Hlaing iterated.

The 'New Generation Group for Justice', of which Khin Maung Win is reportedly a member, was formed in March 2008 by youth in Rangoon who subsequently took part in the 'Red' and 'NO' campaigns associated with drumming up support in opposition to the junta's draft constitution, which was put to a referendum in May of last year.

Khin Maung Win officially married Pan Phyu Phyu Pwint (29) on the day of his sentencing by signing a marriage deed at the main entrance to Insein prison in the presence of the parents of both the bride and groom.

25% fall in Myanmar's tourists

The Straits Times - Jan 6, 2009

YANGON - MYANMAR received nearly 25 per cent fewer tourists through its main airport in 2008, official figures showed Tuesday, in a year when a deadly cyclone laid waste to vast swathes of the military-run nation.

A total of 177,018 visitors arrived at Yangon international airport, down from 231,587 in 2007, figures from the government's hotel and tourism department revealed.

The best month for tourism was March with 21,100 arrivals and the worst was May with 9,258 visitors.

Cyclone Nargis swept the south of Myanmar May 2-3 last year, leaving 138,000 people dead or missing and destroying homes and farmland, particularly in the southwest delta region.

The main tourist season in Myanmar runs from October to April, but the total number of flights for the year was also down to 3,772 from 4,263 in 2007.

No figures were available for the number of tourists arriving by land, but on average about half of visitors enter by land border checkpoints.

Most visitors were from Asia - 115,735 in total, including 26,903 Thais and 18,883 Chinese.

Other tourists came from the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Pacific countries.

'The figures were down because of the Nargis cyclone in May. The figures might also be down in coming months because of the Bangkok crisis and India attack,' tour operator Khin Khin told AFP, adding the global recession was also to blame.

Militant attacks on the Indian city of Mumbai in late November and political turmoil in Thailand that closed Bangkok's international airport for eight days damaged regional tourism.

Although Myanmar has many beautiful places to attract tourists, it has been shunned by many visitors to the region because of the ruling junta.

Myanmar has been ruled by the military since 1962 and is under US and EU-wide sanctions because of its human right record and the ongoing detention of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. -- AFP

Myanmar trade surplus shrinks as gas exports fall

AP – 6 January 2009

YANGON, Myanmar — Myanmar's trade surplus shrank in the first nine months of last year on lower exports of gas, according to official statistics.

Figures from the Ministry of National Planning and Development, seen Tuesday, show the surplus dived more than 39 percent to \$1.72 billion from \$2.83 billion in the same period of 2007.

Imports rose 28.1 percent to \$2.97 billion from \$2.32 billion, while exports dropped 8.9 percent to \$4.69 billion from \$5.15 billion for January to September 2007.

The report says that natural gas exports, which account for about 40 percent of all export revenues, dropped 28.5 percent in value to \$1.69 billion from \$2.36 billion.

Myanmar's gas exports go to neighboring Thailand.

The United States and the European Union have imposed economic sanctions against Myanmar to pressure the military government to improve human rights and release detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

EDITORIAL: Suu Kyi Issues a New Year Challenge

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, January 6, 2009

News reports from Rangoon suggest that Burma's detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi commemorated the country's Independence Day alone at her house—but this time not so quietly.

Behind the locked gates of her home, where she has been under house arrest since 2003, the Nobel Peace Prize winner played old songs, popular in the pre-independence era, according to members of her election-winning party, the National League for Democracy (NLD).

Suu Kyi has also put up a new red banner, which can be viewed from the street, with words in yellow quoting her father, independence hero Gen Aung San: "Act decisively in the interest of the nation and the people."

Rumors are coursing through Rangoon and the diplomatic community suggesting that Suu Kyi could be released this year. If she is freed, the big question remains: who is going to ensure her safety ahead of the election in 2010?

There's profound concern that she would again become the target of the anger of the regime and its thugs. Some Western diplomats are talking about the possibility of a "gradual freedom" for Suu Kyi in order to guarantee her safety.

Speaking to *The Irrawaddy* on Monday, Suu Kyi's lawyer, Kyi Win, said Burmese authorities still have not replied to his request to meet with the detained opposition leader to discuss her appeal against her continued detention. Suu Kyi's personal doctor, Tin Myo Win, was allowed to visit her on January 1, and he reported that she was in good health.

Two days before the doctor's visit, nine NLD members were arrested when they staged a protest in Rangoon calling for her release. Repeated calls by world leaders and the international community for her release continue to fall on the deaf ears of the regime.

Burma entered a new year with bleak prospects for the future. In an Independence Day message, NLD Chairman Aung Shwe said candidly: "Hope for the present and future of the country is totally lacking." Many Burmese will agree with his assessment.

Aung Shwe's pessimism was, of course, countered by an upbeat message from junta leader Snr-Gen Than Shwe, who urged people to "cooperate in realizing the state's seven-step Road Map with union spirit and patriotic spirit with the firm resolution to build up a peaceful, modern and developed democratic nation with flourishing discipline".

Than Shwe repeated his old refrain of accusing "neo-colonialists"—usually a reference to the West—of interfering in Burma's affairs.

"The entire people are duty-bound to safeguard the motherland...while keeping a watchful eye on attempts of neo-colonialists to harm the sovereignty of the country," he said.

Than Shwe failed to appear at the Independence Day state dinner usually hosted by him and his wife, although he was seen in the cyclone-hit Irrawaddy delta a few weeks ago and gave a speech at the Defense Services Academy in Maymyo in December.

Observers ask: Was he sick or perhaps suffering from fatigue after his travels? Or is he just depressed at seeing so little support for his "road map?"

Whatever the cause of Than Shwe's absence from the dinner table, the less he is seen on the political stage, the better for the country. A younger generation of army leaders should be taking over progressively more of his duties and undertaking work for genuine reconciliation.

Despite the discouragement that Burmese people must feel, they should not lose faith in seeing a new democratic and prosperous Burma.

On the eve of Burma's Independence Day, the US State Department wished the Burmese people well on the 61st anniversary of their independence from British rule.

"We wish to express our warmest wishes to the people of Burma on this occasion," said a brief State Department statement. "As we reflect on Burma's independence struggle, led by Gen Aung San, we are reminded of our own history."

The statement said the US stands with the Burmese people in honoring Aung San's vision of an independent, peaceful and democratic Burma.

It said the US also looks forward to the day when Burma's citizens will be able to enjoy the fruits of freedom and democracy. "We earnestly hope that day will come soon," the statement said.

In reality, it is depressing to look at Burma's political situation, and few would argue with Aung Shwe's sober assessment.

Nevertheless, news of Suu Kyi playing old music and putting up a new banner at her home raised some hope. The message "Act decisively in the interest of the nation and the people" has a definite meaning for many Burmese, and can be interpreted as a call to the leadership and members of the NLD.

Critics lament that over the past 20 years, NLD leaders have failed to act decisively to seize and exploit political opportunities as they present themselves.

Even during the "Saffron Revolution" of 2007, some critics said NLD leaders lagged behind the mass uprising when monks and activists bravely took to the streets. Now they sit and watch from the sidelines as Than Shwe prepares to implement his "road map" to "disciplined democracy."

Although the year 2009 begins with depressing news, Suu Kyi's new banner demanding decisive action in the interests of the nation poses a challenge to all Burmese, including members of the armed forces—and also to world leaders and the entire international community.

[David Scott Mathieson: The world looks away as Burma mocks democracy](#)

National Post - January 06, 2009

Dictatorships are not known for their sense of humour, nor do they appreciate being laughed at. It came as no surprise then when the ruling military regime in Burma recently sentenced the country's best known comedian, named Zarganar, to 45 years in prison.

Zarganar (which means pliers in Burmese — he was a practising dentist) was arrested in June for staging private relief operations for survivors of Burma's devastating cyclone in May, and for speaking out about the poor response by the authorities. These efforts, and his unique blend of sardonic wit and absurd reflections about the crushing repression of the military government, landed him in prison for his third stretch in the past 15 years.

Zarganar's sentencing is part of an astonishingly brutal campaign by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in Burma to eradicate all political opposition in the country ahead of planned elections in 2010. In recent months, hundreds of prominent activists, Buddhist monks and nuns, journalists, labour activists, bloggers and hip-hop artists have been sentenced to lengthy jail terms. Some of them are facing between 100 and 150 years back in prison, many for their third or fourth times. Even some of the lawyers representing these activists have been imprisoned, for speaking out about the grossly unfair secret trials held in jail or in closed courthouses.

The activists include a brave labour rights representative named Ma Su Su Nyay, who was handed more than 12 years, and Min Ko Naing, the leader of Burma's 1988 student-led uprising who has already received more than 65 years just on a few charges; his sentencing will probably land him 150 years back in jail, where he spent most of the time between 1988 to 2004 in solitary confinement. Both of them have been past recipients of Canada's John Humphrey Freedom Award.

The past several months have constituted Phase Two of the SPDC's crackdown on peaceful dissent, following on from August and September, 2007, when many of the activists were arrested for their parts in protests against military rule, which saw thousands of Buddhist monks march through the streets to carve out space for larger demonstrations. When the SPDC finally cracked down, dozens of people were killed and thousands were arrested, Zarganar included. He was held in a tiny cell, and when finally released cracked jokes about police dogs and which parts of his anatomy they tried to bite off. Grim humour.

The SPDC has been sentencing these activists for two reasons. The first is to decapitate any possibility of challenge to a tightly scripted and controlled political reform process, by locking away the leadership and spiritual and artistic supporters of resistance to military rule. The second is to instill fear in an already fearful and beaten down population; by targeting a cross-section of Burma's resurgent civil society, the regime is stating clearly that resistance is futile.

Future military rule with a civilian façade is the end goal, and Burma's recently released constitution ensures just that. The planned elections had their prelude in a ruthlessly orchestrated referendum just a week after the cyclone, conducted while the SPDC was blocking urgently needed international assistance. The result? A 98% voter turnout and 92% approval, laughably improbable even by Burma's low standards.

As this despicable process proceeds, the world has shrugged its shoulders in exasperation. The United Nations' muted response to the sentencing rounds is in contrast to the outrage the world expressed after the 2007 demonstrations were met with violence. The UN's efforts at mediation inside Burma are, unfortunately, in tatters. That diplomatic solutions have been elusive is clear: The West and Asia have been at loggerheads over divergent approaches to Burma for years; both quiet persuasion and business investments, over loud human rights moralizing and sanctions, have been equally ineffective in shifting this implacable and shady regime. As China's heavy investments show, especially recently announced plans to build two massive oil and gas pipelines through Burma into Yunnan, the SPDC is content to maintain control over a resentful population as long as they can survive on the proceeds of natural resource sales and the diplomatic cover provided by China, Russia, India and Burma's Southeast Asian neighbours.

The world must speak out, now more than ever, to deny legitimacy to a military reform process that mocks the very idea of democracy and fundamental freedoms. The regime thrives on frustration and lack of attention, happily repressing its people in quiet. If we do not loudly and strongly condemn this draconian process, hundreds of Burma's leading thinkers and performers will disappear into the country's squalid gulag, and the ephemeral promise of a liberal and free Burma could well be lost to another generation.

David Scott Mathieson is Burma consultant for Human Rights Watch.

[Women's group call for investigation into girl's rape and murder](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 06 January 2009 15:06

by Mungpi

New Delhi - An ethnic Karen women's group has condemned the Burmese Army for refusing to investigate the death of a seven-year old girl, whom the group allegedly said was raped and murdered by a soldier.

The Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), a Thailand based organization, said a seven-year old girl in Ma Oo Bin village in Nyaunglebin district in central Burma's Pegu division was found dead on December 28 with marks on her body showing she had been murdered after being raped.

"The girl was found dead the next morning after disappearing in the evening of December 27. And marks on her body revealed that she was murdered after being molested," Blooming Night Zan, Assistant Secretary of the KWO said.

The KWO alleged that a soldier from the Burmese Army's Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 350, which is based in the area, had murdered the girl after raping her.

"Elders saw the soldier coming to the village on December 27 evening and had seen him with the girl. And not long after they heard gun fire. The villagers said they heard the girl crying for help," Blooming Night Zan told Mizzima.

As villagers are terrorized by the sight of Burmese Army, the villagers had not dared to come to the rescue of the girl, Blooming Night Zan added.

But she said, the commander of the LIB-350 captain Thet Khaing, despite complaints by the villagers, had not taken any action or conducted an investigation into the rape and murder.

The KWO's accusations, however, cannot be independently verified as it was not possible to reach villagers of Ma Oo Bin, who know of the rape and murder.

The Burmese Army, which has 400,000 soldiers, has time and again come under attack by human rights groups including the Human Rights Watch, condemning them of widely using systematic rape as a weapon to terrorize ethnic people living along the frontiers.

The Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), an advocacy group promoting human rights and democracy in Burma, in a statement on Monday condemned the Burmese Army for failing to conduct investigations over the death of the girl and to arrest the perpetrator and bring him to justice.

"Rape is systematic and widespread and used as a weapon of war by the Burmese Army throughout the country. This latest tragic case is an example of the culture of impunity reigning throughout the military regime," Stuart Windsor, CSW's National Director said.

"We strongly support the KWO's call for the arrest and prosecution of those guilty of the murder and rape of this young child. We believe the regime in Burma is guilty of a wide range of crimes against humanity which should be investigated and brought before the International Criminal Court," added Windsor.

According to KWO, the village of Ma Oo Bin is inhabited by ethnic Karen people, who were forcibly relocated from various parts of Karen state by the Burmese Army in their campaign against Karen guerrillas fighting the junta.

[Ethnic veteran political leader Saw Mara Aung dies](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 05 January 2009 22:46

New Delhi (Mizzima) - Burma's veteran ethnic politician Dr. Saw Mara Aung died on Monday evening at his Rangoon residence, political allies said.

Dr. Saw Mara Aung (92), chairman of the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) passed away at about 7 p.m. (local time), Nyan Win, spokesperson of Burma's main opposition party – National League for Democracy – said.

The veteran Arakanese politician was an elected member of Parliament from Marauk-U constituent No. 1 in Burma's last general election in 1990, which the ruling military junta refused to recognize.

Saw Mara Aung, like many of his political allies, was arrested and detained by the military for his political activities and was released in 2001.

He served as Chairman of the Committee Representing Peoples Parliament (CRPP), a committee formed in 1998 to convene Parliament based on the 1990 election results.

Nyan Win said, "I heard that the burial will take place on Tuesday morning."

[UNICEF to continue polio vaccination program in Myanmar this year](#)

Xinhua - 2009-01-06 13:07:17

YANGON, Jan. 6 () -- The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) will continue its program of vaccination against polio in Myanmar in 2009, the local Weekly Eleven journal reported Tuesday.

The polio vaccination campaign for this year will be launched for two rounds -- the first from Jan. 10 to 12, and the second from Feb. 7 to 9, the report said.

The UNICEF polio vaccination campaign will also be launched in areas hit by the last May storm, the report added.

The UNICEF has carried out the polio vaccination campaign since 1996 which also includes vaccination against measles, tetanus, diphtheria, whooping cough and ARI (Acute Respiratory Infection) diseases.

In 2007, a total of 2.5 million children under the age of five in Myanmar were vaccinated against polio during the country's polio vaccination campaign under a specially expanded program on immunization following the detection of fresh wild polio virus in a two-and-a-half-year-old boy in Maungtaw township, western coastal Rakhine state on April 19.

The wild polio virus was then spread from neighboring countries, earlier reports said.

Long-term cooperation has been made between Myanmar and Bangladesh, one of the neighboring countries bordering Myanmar's Maungtaw.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization has also been cooperating with Myanmar's health ministry over the prevention measures.

The Myanmar health authorities have stressed the importance to continue working towards a polio-free country despite enjoying the status since 2003.

[Doomed US-built wartime road finds new life: China working to make use of route to India](#)

Los Angeles Times | January 4, 2009

MYITKYINA, Burma - It was a road some said could not be built. Most of the men ordered to make it happen were black soldiers sorted into Army units by the color of their skin.

As World War II raged, they labored day and night in the jungles of Burma, sometimes halfway up 10,000-foot mountains, drenched by 140 inches of rain in the five-month monsoon season. They spanned

raging rivers and pushed through swamps thick with bloodsucking leeches and swarms of biting mites and mosquitoes that spread typhus and malaria.

Some died from disease or fell to their deaths when construction equipment slid along soupy mud tracks and dropped off cliffs. Others drowned or were killed pulling double duty in combat against the Japanese.

They gave their lives to build a 1,079-mile road across northern Burma to reinforce Allied troops, a project derided by Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Britain as "an immense, laborious task, unlikely to be finished until the need for it has passed."

Not long after the thankless job was done, two atomic blasts finished the war with Japan, and a hard-won passage that soldiers called "the Big Snake" was abandoned to the rain forest. The road had cost 1,133 American lives, a man a mile.

Evelio Grillo is one of the few vets still alive to tell the tale of the Stilwell Road.

The son of black Cubans who migrated to Florida to roll cigars in Tampa factories, Grillo graduated from Xavier University, a black college in New Orleans, and was drafted. He made staff sergeant in the Army's segregated 823d Engineer Battalion.

In a black-and-white photo he sent home during the war, Grillo wears his khaki uniform and garrison cap, one eyebrow slightly arched, his eyes dark and mischievous.

He remembers making road trips across the border to India to buy light bulbs when the old ones popped in their sockets most nights in their camp. The new ones exploded just as quickly as the ones they replaced.

Grillo also tells of officers who ordered him to measure the road with lengths of chain for hours on end until someone finally pointed out that the Army jeeps had odometers.

"That was probably you," Grillo's daughter Elisa Grillo Clay says from her father's bedside at a nursing home in Oakland, Calif., proudly calling him "a professional troublemaker."

Grillo, 89, was one of more than 15,000 US soldiers who put their backs into the punishing work that many thought was futile. In a little more than two years, they completed the road from India to the western Chinese city of Kunming. The United States spent almost \$149 million to build it and, at the request of Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek, it was named the Stilwell Road, after US General Joseph "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, the abrasive commander of Allied troops in the region who insisted that the project would work.

More than half a century later, China is working to resurrect it as the first major overland trade route since World War II with India, where business leaders, politicians, and bureaucrats also are pressing their government to formally commit itself to the road as a link between the world's two most populous nations.

In 2005, Indian and Chinese survey teams began mapping out plans to rebuild the road. China has done all the reconstruction work, paving dozens of miles with granite stones packed into dirt.

The men who built the road weren't honored for their feat until 2004, when the Defense Department marked African American History Month at Florida A&M University.

[Bush to Discuss Burma with Ban at White House](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, January 5, 2009

By LALIT K JHA

WASHINGTON — US President George W Bush will discuss the current situation in Burma along with other issues when he meets with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Tuesday in the White House.

It will probably be Bush's last meeting with Ban as the US President, the White House said.

Before handing over the presidency to Barack Obama on January 20, Bush has invited Ban and his wife, Ban Soon-taek, to the White House for lunch.

"This meeting will be an opportunity for the President to thank Secretary-General Ban for his leadership of the United Nations and his cooperation on key issues over the past two years," said White House spokesperson Gordon Johndroe.

"They will discuss the future of the United Nations and the challenges that remain, such as UN reform, the Middle East, Burma, Somalia and peacekeeping in Darfur," Johndroe said.

However, the meeting is unlikely to yield any result for the people of Burma, given that Bush is leaving office and Ban has been unable to make any headway towards restoration of democracy in Burma.

Ban was scheduled to visit Burma in December, but he has postponed his trip until a time when it would yield tangible results.

Johndroe said during the meeting the US President will stress the need for a United Nations that can act effectively to promote freedom, democratic governance, human rights and a world free from terror.

Meanwhile, in a statement issued Friday, one day before the 61st anniversary of Burma's Independence Day, the State Department wished the people of Burma well on the occasion of the 61st anniversary of its independence from the British rule.

"We wish to express our warmest wishes to the people of Burma on this occasion. As we reflect on Burma's independence struggle, led by Gen Aung San, we are reminded of our own history," said the brief statement.

The State Department said the US stands with the Burmese people on in honoring Aung San's vision for an independent, peaceful, and democratic Burma.

The US also looks forward to the day when Burma's citizens will be able to enjoy the fruits of freedom and democracy. "We earnestly hope that day will come soon," the statement said.

[Junta Determined to 'Guide' 2010 Polls](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, January 5, 2009

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR / IPS WRITER

BANGKOK — Burma's military regime ended 2008 with greater resolve to steamroll over opposition voices in order to pave the way for a junta-friendly government when the country holds general elections in 2010.

On December 30, nine supporters of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi were arrested when they staged a protest in Rangoon, the former capital, calling for her release. Some of the protesters were wearing the colors of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party that she heads.

The risk these activists took in placing their lives on the side of political freedom has been heightened in the wake of harsh judgments delivered against leading voices of the country's struggling democracy movement in November. Some of them were given long jail terms and Min Ko Naing, a widely respected former university student leader, was put away for 65 years.

The November verdicts, which saw 215 political activists sentenced, were largely linked to the peaceful, pro-democracy street protests, led by thousands of Buddhist monks, held in September 2007.

Buddhist monks who were in the vanguard of the protests, which was crushed by the junta, were not spared. U Gambria, a leader of the All Burma Monks' Alliance, was sentenced to 68 years in jail.

The verdicts delivered by a military-controlled court inside Rangoon's notorious Insein prison were as harsh on Burmese who led a humanitarian effort to aid the victims of the powerful Cyclone Nargis, which tore through the country's Irrawaddy Delta in early May, killing tens of thousands and affecting millions.

Zarganar, a well-known comedian who was arrested for leading a team of entertainers to help the cyclone victims, was slapped with a 59-year sentence.

"This is all part of an aggressive campaign to jail good, pro-democracy activists who could run in the 2010 elections," says Debbie Stothard of ALTSEAN, a regional human rights group monitoring abuse in Burma.

"Anybody who could be a viable opposition figure has been locked up. There are no signs of the regime easing up."

Even token pressure from marginal voices in the country is being stifled, she revealed in an IPS interview. "The New Year will see more arrests. They are creating another Zimbabwe."

Such ability to crush an already beleaguered people has become possible given the ease with which the junta succeeded in bullying and bluffing the United Nations through the year.

Other members of the international community, including giants China and Russia, also played their part to help the Burmese military dictatorship impose its roadmap for a "discipline flourishing democracy."

The junta's success at reducing the world body to a minor irritant became more evident after UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon cancelled plans to visit Burma, or Myanmar, in December. That the junta was in no mood for Ban—or for a push by his office for concrete issues to be discussed during such a visit—was hardly a surprise.

Ban's predicament highlighted a defining feature of how the Burmese regime was responding to international pressure. In May, Ban became the first UN chief to visit Burma following the devastating Cyclone Nargis. But all the assurances he got from the military regime for more openness to enable humanitarian assistance to the victims amounted to little.

The UN received another embarrassing snub from the junta in August, when Ibrahim Gambari, the world body's special envoy to Burma, was treated like an unwelcome guest and relegated to meeting minor officials during a visit aimed to prod the regime towards democratic reform. Earlier in 2008, Gambari had received a tongue-lashing from Burma's information minister, removing all doubt about the contempt with which the junta views the Nigerian diplomat.

Yet at the same time, sections of the international community still place faith in the UN to deliver. In early December, for instance, a group of more than 100 former heads of governments and states wrote a letter to Ban, asking him to travel to Burma to secure the release of Suu Kyi and the over 2,100 political prisoners by December 31.

"It is important that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon travel to the country himself and engage in serious dialogue with the military regime and impress on them the calls by leaders and lawmakers from Asia and around the world for the release of all political prisoners," Kraisak Choonhavan, a Thai parliamentarian, said at the time.

Among the leaders who signed this unprecedented petition were former US presidents George H W Bush and Jimmy Carter, former Australian prime minister John Howard, former Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi and former Philippines president Corazon Aquino.

The petition to Ban drew attention to developments in the UN Security Council in October 2007, when a presidential statement had urged the prompt release of all political prisoners in Burma.

Yet what has prevailed since that rare pressure on the junta from the UN's most powerful body illustrates the aggressive and defiant position Burma's military regime is pursuing. In mid-2007, the number of political prisoners stood at 1,200; now it has nearly doubled to over 2,100.

The military regime "will stop at nothing to prevent people from joining demonstrations or be influenced by the voices of the democracy activists," says Bo Kyi, a former political prisoner who heads the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners in Burma, a human rights group based on the Thai-Burma border. "They want to create a greater climate of fear among the general public."

It is all part of the junta's plan to be certain of victory at the 2010 polls "even before the elections," Bo Kyi explained in an interview. "They want to avoid a repeat of the 1990 elections."

At that poll, held after the regime brutally crushed a pro-democracy uprising in 1988, where close to 3,000 activists were shot to death, the NLD trounced the junta-backed National Unity Party with a thumping majority. But the regime refused to recognize the results and began targeting the elected parliamentarians.

Burmese political activists like Bo Kyi believe that only the international community in 2009 can stall the junta's plans to hijack the 2010 polls. "The international community needs to exert real pressure that they will not accept the results of the 2010 elections without the release of all political prisoners and a free environment for the polls."

Than Shwe Fails to Attend Independence Day Dinner

Irrawaddy - Monday, January 5, 2009

By WAI MOE

For the second time in three years, the head of Burma's ruling military junta, Snr-Gen Than Shwe, failed to make an appearance at a state dinner marking the country's Independence Day on Sunday.

According to a front-page report in the state-run *New Light of Myanmar* on Monday, the regime's second highest-ranking member, Vice-Snr-Gen Maung Aye, and his wife Mya Mya San hosted the annual state dinner on behalf of Than Shwe and his wife, Kyaing Kyaing. No official explanation was given for the senior leader's absence.

The dinner, held in the junta's capital Naypyidaw, was also attended by third-ranking Gen Thura Shwe Mann, Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein, and another high-ranking general, Lt-Gen Thiha Thura Tin Maung Myint Oo.

Some observers suggested that Than Shwe's absence was due to his reluctance to meet with foreign diplomats attending the event, as the regime has come under intense criticism from the international community over its latest crackdown on dissidents.

There was also speculation among Burma watchers about the state of Than Shwe's health. In 2007, he missed the dinner because he was in Singapore for medical treatment. Now 75 years old, Than Shwe reportedly suffers from diabetes and hypertension.

Despite persistent rumors of his failing health, however, the state-run media reported that Than Shwe traveled extensively in the final weeks of the year.

On December 13, he attended a graduation ceremony at the elite Defense Services Academy in Maymyo (also called Pyin Oo Lwin) in Mandalay Division. He made his last public appearance on December 30 as he was traveling to Zalun and Bassein townships in Irrawaddy Division.

His tour of the country ended with him paying his respects to Zalun's Mahn Aung Myin *Pyidawbyan* Buddha statue, which is famous as a symbol of Burmese resistance to foreign pressure.

The Burmese word *pyidawbyan* means "return to the native land." The British took the statue to India following their conquest of Lower Burma in 1855 and attempted to use it to make coins, ammunition and cannons. However, they were unable to break it down and returned it to Burma in 1857.

Foreign investment in Myanmar soars

AP - 5 January 2009

YANGON, Myanmar — Foreign investment in Myanmar — much of it from China — nearly doubled in the first nine months of 2008 compared to the same period last year, according to government statistics seen Monday.

Mining accounted for more than 88 percent of the total foreign investment — a record for that sector.

Investment from January to September last year jumped to \$974.9 million dollars from \$502.5 million in the same period the previous year, said the Ministry of National Planning and Development in its latest statistical survey.

That was the second-highest amount for this nine-month span after 2006, when Thailand built a hydroelectric plant.

China accounted for \$855 million of the \$860.9 million invested in mining while Russia and Vietnam added \$114 million in the oil and gas sector. China has signed a number of agreements with the resource-rich country to mine gems, gold and nickel.

The U.S. and European Union have imposed economic sanctions on Myanmar to pressure the military government to improve human rights and release detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Since Myanmar liberalized its investment code in late 1988, it has attracted large investments in the hydro-electric power and oil and gas sectors.

UWSP Proposes Wa Autonomous Region

Irrawaddy - Monday, January 5, 2009

By LAWI WENG

The United Wa State Party (UWSP), an ethnic ceasefire group based in northern Burma, has proposed to the country's military regime that territory under Wa control be designated a special autonomous region from the beginning of January 2009, according to political observers based in the area.

Aung Kyaw Zaw, a Burmese analyst based on the Sino-Burmese border, said that some Wa leaders had told him in recent telephone conversations that the party was now issuing documents stamped "Government of Wa State, Special Autonomous Region, Union of Myanmar."

"This is a sign that they are preparing to establish a Wa autonomous region," said Aung Kyaw Zwa.

However, observers said that the Burmese military still hasn't responded to a proposal to rename the Wa territory the "Wa State Government Special Region."

The Wa area has been known by the Burmese military as "Shan State Special Region 2" since the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the armed wing of the UWSP, entered into a ceasefire agreement with the regime in 1989.

In 2003, when the UWSP attended a junta-sponsored national constitutional convention, the party asked to be allowed to form a Wa State within Burma.

Wa political observers estimated that there are 20,000 UWSA soldiers currently deployed along Burma's borders with Thailand and China, while an estimated 60,000 to 120,000 Wa villagers inhabit areas of lower Shan State.

Under the regime's new constitution, six townships in two districts of Shan State—Hopang, Mongma, Panwai, Nahpan, Metman and Pangsang—comprise an area designated the Wa Self-Administered Division.

Khuensai Jaiyen, editor of the *Shan Herald Agency for News*, based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, said that the UWSP was using the constitution as the basis of its call for autonomy. "The UWSP is testing the Burmese military government's new constitution to see if it is genuine or not. If it is, the regime has to allow the Wa to form an autonomous region," he said.

"The Wa will take part in the [junta's 2010] election if the Burmese military recognizes their proposal," said Mai Aik Phone, who is close to Wa leaders. "At the moment, they are in wait-and-see mode."

Meanwhile, tensions between the regime and the UWSA have been mounting since Maj-Gen Kyaw Phyoe, the Burmese Army's regional commander in the Golden Triangle area of Shan State, told the UWSA to disarm in December and join the upcoming election in 2010.

Wa leaders categorically rejected Maj-Gen Kyaw Phyoe's proposal, according to sources.

Suu Kyi Celebrates Independence Day with Music

Irrawaddy - Monday, January 5, 2009

On Independence Day this year, Burma's detained democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, has chosen not to stay quiet behind the locked gates of her home where she is under house arrest.

Members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) said they heard old songs, popular in the pre-independence era, playing in her home.

On Sunday, Burma marked the 61st anniversary of its independence from Britain in 1948.

Suu Kyi has also put up a new red banner, which can be viewed from the street, with words in yellow quoting her father, independence hero Gen Aung San: "Act decisively in the interest of the nation and the people."

The NLD, in a ceremony at its headquarter in Rangoon attended by 300 people, including veteran politicians and diplomats, called for the release of Suu Kyi, who has been detained for more than 13 of the past 19 years.

On December 30, nine NLD members were arrested when they staged a protest in Rangoon calling for her release. A commentary in the recent issue of the Weekly Eleven journal says the junta will charge those arrested "according to the law."

Speaking to *The Irrawaddy* on Monday, Suu Kyi's lawyer, Kyi Win, said Burmese authorities still have not replied to his request to meet with the detained opposition leader to discuss her appeal against her continued detention. But Suu Kyi was allowed a visit by her personal doctor, Tin Myo Win, on January 1 and she was in good health.

Suu Kyi's latest five-year term of house arrest was extended in May for a further year—illegally, according to Kyi Win, because Article 10 (b) of the Burmese State Protection Law 1975 stipulates that a person judged to be a "threat to the sovereignty and security of the State and the peace of the people" can only be detained for up to five years.

Meanwhile, junta ministers, and about 3,000 government employees and senior officials, attended the official Independence Day ceremony and military parade in Naypyidaw. Junta leader Snr-Gen Than Shwe did not attend.

However, in his official speech, read at the gathering, Than Shwe accused "neo-colonialists"—normally a reference to the Western countries led by the US—of interfering in Burma's affairs.

"They are using some international organizations to gain support for their schemes and driving a wedge among national people and inciting riots to undermine national unity, peace and the stability of the nation," he said.

In December, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on Burma to free all political prisoners, including Suu Kyi.

The resolution also voiced concern over the junta's so-called "seven-step roadmap" to democracy, including the planned general election in 2010, noting the failure of the regime to include other political parties, members of Burma's main opposition party, the National League for Democracy, and representatives of ethnic political organizations in the process.

[Opposition: No hope for future of Myanmar](#)

AP – 4 January 2009

YANGON, Myanmar — Myanmar's pro-democracy party marked the 61st anniversary of the country's independence from Great Britain on Sunday, saying it foresaw no hope for the military-ruled country.

At a ceremony inside the dilapidated headquarters of the opposition National League for Democracy, its chairman Aung Shwe also called for the release of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi and other party leaders.

Suu Kyi — who has been under house arrest for more than 13 of the past 19 years — put up a banner at the gate of her home quoting a speech her father, independence hero Gen. Aung San, had once given: "Act decisively in the interest of the nation and the people."

In a speech to about 250 party members and diplomats, Aung Shwe said that national unity is in disarray and that there is "no harmony between the government and the governed."

"Hope for the present and future of the country is totally lacking," Aung Shwe said.

Myanmar gained independence from Britain on Jan. 4, 1948, after more than 120 years of colonial rule. It has been under harsh military rule since 1962.

Meanwhile, the leader of the military junta Senior Gen. Than Shwe warned that "neocolonialists" were interfering in domestic affairs and inciting riots to undermine unity and stability.

"Neocolonialists" normally refers to Western nations that have been sharply critical of the regime's human rights record and brutal crackdowns on any protests.

The current junta emerged in 1988 after violently suppressing mass pro-democracy protests. It held a general election in 1990, but refused to recognize the results after a landslide victory by Suu Kyi's party.

[Commentary: Don't be fooled by the 'little' woman](#)

The Observer, Sunday 4 January 2009

Helen Suzman's legacy will last far longer than the enemies who called her a 'vicious little cat'

Whenever "women and children" are killed - the phrase has recurred in last week's coverage of the Israeli bombardment of Gaza - we're meant to be especially horrified. That assumption has always irked me. Is there anything more acceptable about killing men? By implication, women are cheap shots, fish in barrels because they're helpless. The set phrase decodes as "women who are effectively children and children".

Yet slyly, numerous female activists have turned their [gender's](#) reputation for frailty to their advantage. A sharp-tongued, anti-apartheid campaigner who died last week aged 91, the white South African Helen Suzman was part of a long tradition of politically courageous women who have cunningly leveraged the homily that it's sissy to pick on a girl.

Small, well-dressed and, according to Desmond Tutu, "indomitable", Suzman was a South African MP from 1953 to 1989 and was a rare voice of dissent while the most oppressive of apartheid's legal infrastructure was drafted. She was sometimes criticised for the complicity of working within the system. Yet only her parliamentary immunity facilitated outspoken views that otherwise would have subjected her to a banning order, which forbade congregating and could entail house arrest. From 1967, she paid regular visits to Robben Island. Nelson Mandela recalls: "She was the first and only woman ever to grace our cells." Suzman stood up to formidable prime ministers - Verwoerd, Vorster and Botha - whom she denounced as "bullies".

Female activists have often used women's supposed weakness as both weapon and shield. Nearly six feet tall and more physically imposing than the white men in her Ohio audience, the freed slave Sojourner Truth famously twinned women's rights and abolitionism in her "Ain't I a Woman?" speech of 1851: "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman?" The refrain has a droll, mocking quality: if you put women on pedestals, don't you have to put black women up there too? And I may be a mere woman, but who'd come out on top if we were to arm wrestle?

The Burmese dissenter Aung San Suu Kyi could well have been assassinated by now if she were a man. Delicate, slight and fetching, she makes the perfect poster girl for human rights in Burma. In contrast to Sojourner Truth, whose towering muscularity presented her opponents with the contradictions in their prejudices, Suu Kyi's very physical vulnerability lends her an invulnerability.

By constraining themselves to her non-violent house arrest, even this ruthless military junta demonstrates a discomfort with being seen to be beating a waif. Likewise, Rosa Parks got away with sitting at the front of the bus, but a male counterpart might have been bludgeoned senseless.

We women can play stereotypes in addition to our ostensible helplessness. We can capitalise on the role of the mother as the central source of moral authority in the family. With her round, jovial face and generous figure, the Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai brings a maternal heft to her environmental causes and campaign against corruption in Kenya. Women's traditional (utterly rubbish) association with goodness, innocence and purity can confer the imprimatur of righteousness. Certainly, the fact that women are associated with gentleness and life provides female suicide bombers additional shock value.

Female activists tend to draw a distinctively dismissive condescension from their male opposition. John Vorster ridiculed Helen Suzman for beating her "pretty little pink hands" against apartheid and PW Botha characterised her as "a vicious little cat". American suffragist Susan B Anthony was derided as an "old maid" who undermined traditional womanhood because she couldn't herself get a man.

Unfortunately, many a crusader has found no protection in her sex. Unlike Helen Suzman, anti-apartheid activist Ruth First was murdered by a letter bomb, whose return address was almost certainly the South African military. Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, a Putin critic, was assassinated in her apartment block in 2006. Ten years earlier, the Irish investigative journalist Veronica Guerin, who outed Dublin's organised crime figures, was shot four times at a traffic light by a thug on a motorcycle alongside her car. Being female may have protected the Iranian Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi from worse fates, but her gender didn't keep the Iranian police from closing down the offices of her human rights group. It hasn't kept Ebadi safe from death threats, although her sex may have helped to ensure that, so far, none has been carried out.

The problems with this girl-power strategy are three. First, the gambit only works in paternalistic cultures, since it capitalises on the notion that women are defenceless. The more progressive the prevailing gestalt the less femininity can be exploited. Clare Short's principled stand against the Iraq war may not have been all that much more unassailable just because she wears a skirt.

Second, women who take risky political positions can generate a halo of untouchability only if the opposition has some scruples, worries about gaining a reputation for tyrannising the weak and can therefore be embarrassed. (Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent protests could only have prevailed against an empire that couldn't stomach mowing down unarmed Indians by the hundreds. Hitler would have had no problem.) Thus Mugabe's minions have beaten and jailed the members of Women of Zimbabwe Arise without blinking an eye.

Last, the more women such as Suzman show strength, the more they demonstrate they are anything but helpless; the more they prove to be as dangerous politically as any man, the less effective playing the girl card will prove. Success exacts its price.

- Lionel Shriver's most recent novel is *The Post-Birthday World*, HarperCollins

[DPRK vows to strengthen ties with Myanmar](#)

Xinhua - 2009-01-03 21:33:30

PYONGYANG, Jan. 3 () -- The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) will strengthen its friendly and cooperative ties with Myanmar, senior officials said on Saturday.

The DPRK's top legislator Kim Yong Nam and Premier Kim Jong Il sent a greeting message to their Myanmar counterparts ahead of the 61st Independence Day of the Southeast Asian country, the official KCNA news said.

The DPRK-Myanmar relations will expand in full scale in such fields as politics, economy and culture, they said.

Jan. 4 this year marks the 61st Independence Day of Myanmar.

[Myanmar terminates some publications for failure to register](#)

Xinhua - 2009-01-03 13:59:35

YANGON, Jan. 3 () -- The Myanmar Information Ministry has terminated some 11 journals and 20 magazines, the local weekly Voice journal reported Saturday, quoting the Central Press Scrutiny and Registration Board.

The 11 journals, revoked from publication for failure to apply for renewal of registration, included The Thant Yaung, Viva Sports, Aung Nameik, Film News, International Crimes, Maha, Bulletin, Trend, Aung Su Youth, Music World and Company Directory.

According to statistics, there are over 250 private magazines and 200 journals being sold in the domestic markets.

Among the journals granted over the past few years, sports journals dominated in number, followed by news journals which carry domestic and international news, news related to arts, children, health and crime.

The number of journals covering domestic news has grown over the past decade in Myanmar, thanks to market demand and the emergence of more such journals also contributes to the development of journalism, readers said.

The Information Ministry took over the duties of the press scrutiny and registration from the Ministry of Home Affairs in February 2005, granting the publication and distribution of journals and magazines as long as they conform to the prescribed policy.

Other official statistics show that there were a total of over 5,000 printing houses and 759 publishers in Myanmar. More than 9,700 titles of books on various topics were also published.

[Sheikh Hasina seeks Suu Kyi's release](#)

Mizzima News - Friday, 02 January 2009 12:50

by Siddique Islam

Dhaka — Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's Prime Minister in waiting has sought the release of Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from prolonged house arrest and friendly relations with all neighbouring countries.

Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina made the demand at the first press conference after her party and the Awami League-led grand alliance's resounding victory in Monday's Parliament elections. The press conference was held at the Bangladesh-China Conference Centre in Dhaka on Wednesday.

"I have also been in prison for restoration of democracy in my country and she should not be in prison. We demand the release of Suu Kyi," Hasina said replying to a query.

She said her government would maintain friendly relations with China, the present world's fastest-growing economic powerhouse, and seek Chinese investments in Bangladesh.

Hasina, who is expected to be sworn in on or before January 10 as Prime Minister, her second stint after a break of five-plus-two years, said the first task of her government would be to cut high prices of essential commodities so that it is within the reach of the common man and eradicate poverty.

Excluding the seats of its partners, the AL bagged an astounding 230 seats in the ninth parliamentary elections, up from 62 in the 2001 polls.

The AL's landslide victory is a reminder of yet another landmark election in 1970 when the slain president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman garnered absolute majority, but was denied power by the then Pakistani regime, political observers said.

According to the Election Commission (EC) counts, the grand alliance got 262 seats while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led four-party coalition won only 32 seats, independents four and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) one.

A total of 1,555 candidates from 39 political parties including independent candidates contested the election to replace the caretaker administration.

The last general election was held on October 1, 2001 for the 8th Parliament. A total of 1,935 candidates representing 54 parties and including 484 independents had contested the polls.

Thousands of voters turned up in the capital city and elsewhere in the country to exercise their franchise as voting took place in a peaceful atmosphere.

Local and foreign election observers, in their preliminary assessments, have hailed the parliamentary elections as by far the most "peaceful" and fairest, calling upon the opposition to accept the people's verdict.

Of the total 81,05,8698 voters, the turnout was around 80 per cent on an average as against the last election's nearly 75 per cent, EC officials confirmed.

[US backs democracy in Myanmar ahead of anniversary](#)

AFP – 3 January 2009

WASHINGTON — The United States on Friday highlighted its support for efforts to establish democracy in military-run Myanmar, ahead of the country's 61st anniversary of independence.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack alluded to the human rights crackdown by the military junta that has been in power since 1962, as he commemorated the anniversary of independence from Britain on January 4, 1948.

"We wish to express our warmest wishes to the people of Burma on this occasion," McCormack said in a statement, referring to the country's name before the junta changed it to Myanmar in 1989.

"As we reflect on Burma's independence struggle, led by General Aung San, we are reminded of our own history," the statement said, alluding to the US drive for independence from Britain in the 18th century.

"We support the peaceful efforts of people everywhere to exercise freely their universal human rights," he said.

"We stand with the Burmese people today in honoring Aung San's vision for an independent, peaceful, and democratic Burma and look forward to the day when Burma's citizens will be able to enjoy the fruits of freedom and democracy," he said.

"We earnestly hope that day will come soon," according to McCormack's statement.

Massive protests in 2007, sparked initially by fuel-hikes and involving tens of thousands of people, were eventually crushed by the military. At least 31 people were killed, according to the United Nations.

[Burma frees North Korean refugees](#)

BBC News - 2009/01/01 11:24:46 GMT

The Burmese authorities have released 19 North Korean refugees at the border with Thailand, a South Korean diplomat has said.

The diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the move would pave the way for their travel to South Korea.

The Burmese government had detained the 19 refugees for a month on charges of illegal entry.

Instead of being jailed or deported, the refugees will now stay in a Thai detention centre.

Refugee supporters had feared the Burmese government might have sent the refugees back to North Korea.

But the group - which includes 15 women and a seven-year old boy - now have a chance of a new life.

They had been arrested on 2 December as they were trying to cross from Burma into Thailand.

Dangerous escape

Many North Koreans who have managed the dangerous escape from North Korea into China in the past have often travelled southward, undetected.

Thailand does not formally recognise asylum seekers as refugees, but has pursued a policy of allowing for their care by international refugee groups in Thailand pending resettlement in third countries.

Officials in Burma, who rarely speak to the press, were not available for comment, and the Immigration Department in Bangkok, Thailand, said they had not heard of the transfer yet.

Thousands of people have fled North Korea in recent years, and at least 14,000 of them have found their way to asylum in South Korea.

Burma's response to this group of North Koreans was thought to be unpredictable as the country had been working quietly to normalise relations with North Korea since diplomatic ties were restored in 2007.

Burma had severed relations with North Korea in 1983 following a bombing in Rangoon by North Korean secret agents which targeted former South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan.

He was unhurt, but 21 people were killed and Burma was outraged at the offence mounted on its soil.

[Commentary: Unprincipled discrimination and dignity](#)

Mizzima - Thursday, 01 January 2009 23:25

by Min Ko Moe

"Respect for human dignity implies commitment to creating conditions under which individuals can develop a sense of self-worth and security. True dignity comes with an assurance of one's ability to rise to the challenges of the human situation." - Aung San Suu Kyi

"Human beings are born free, equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." - * Article 1, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The unequal opportunities and rights embodied in the 2008 Myanmar Constitution disregards the universal recognition that humans being born free, with equality in dignity and rights. The new Constitution is structured in a hierarchical chain-of-command with military personnel as the first class, male citizens as the second and female citizens as the third. The principles of equality in opportunity and justice in the political, social and economic spheres are ignored, leaving those citizens who possess less opportunities and rights as constantly under assault whenever conflicting claims prevail. This Constitution does not uphold the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood and claims the dignity and rights of civilian citizens are inferior to those of military personnel – who in reality are forgetting their roles as public servants.

In introspection, the drafting of the Constitution in the National Convention was not in accordance with democratic methods, even though the creation of a democratic state is the purported aim of the military clique. A democratic method demands a decision by discussion, argument and persuasion. However, state Law No. 5/96 forbids civilian citizens to exercise their consciousness in the making of the supreme law of the land. According to this law, any person whose action is construed as criticizing the National Convention format, designed by the military government, shall be imprisoned for a term of a minimum of five years and a maximum of 20, and may also be liable to a fine. Democracy does not believe in the suppression of thought, the suppression of human consciousness. Based on this law, it is doubtful that the National Convention was convened by genuine representatives of freedom loving people. Would genuine representatives of the people codify a Constitution which disregards their inherent dignity and rights? Moreover, it is improbable that democratic citizens agreed to authorize that 25 percent of seats in the state assembly be reserved for military representatives. Simply put, the 2008 Constitution was made by those who are not genuine representatives of the people.

Gender justice plays a vital role in modern nation-state building. Gender justice means women must be permitted to exercise full participation in the decision making process and fully participate alongside men in all walks of life in the pursuit of equitable and practical solutions to issues of family and society. Men and women should have equal choices and rights in a democratic society. Equal choices protect the

human dignity of women, and human civilization has evolved with the progress of the human consciousness. Yet, Burma today is an ancient world in which human relations are defined by status.

Respect for the dignity of women is a prerequisite if we want to build a society of justice in which all human beings have equal democratic choices pertaining to development. Equality in dignity and rights between men and women is recognized in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. However, Article 352 of the 2008 Myanmar Constitution reads:

"The Union shall, upon specified qualifications being fulfilled, in appointing or assigning duties to civil service personnel, not discriminate for or against any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, based on race, birth, religion, and sex. However, nothing in this Section shall prevent appointment of men to the positions that are suitable for men only."

This is a contradictory provision. By specifying 'positions that are suitable for men only', the text clearly implies that women are prohibited from holding certain positions in civil service. This prohibition insults women who are also members in a family of human beings. In the field of politics, political justice is also violated by Article 352. Political justice means the absence of any arbitrary distinction between man and woman in the political sphere. Yet, according to this provision, women in Burma are not allowed to fully participate in the political system, the sense of self-worth of women being disrespected. The Constitution's embodiment of unequal opportunities based on gender in the matter of public employment is not consistent with the democratic ideal. If the purpose of the military clique was to forbid women from holding the highest political office of the state, they should open their eyes and recognize the great women leaders of the world. It is, therefore, unreasonable discrimination to treat women as inferior. This discrimination makes a mockery of the progress of human civilization and the democratic ideal.

Accountability is another backbone of the democratic state. Without accountability, implementation of constitutional provisions and public policies could easily deviate from public interests and universal justice. In a genuine democratic society and state, the functioning of good governance and the rule of law are directly controlled by the notion of accountability. This concept implies that those in authority can be called upon to answer questions about their rule. And ultimately, accountability infers that the people can dispose of those governing if the law and historically given rights and obligations are not respected.

However, the notion of accountability imbedded in the 2008 Constitution does not apply to military representatives, but rather only to elected representatives. An example of unprincipled discrimination is on display in Article 38 (b) of the Constitution, which states: "Electorate concerned shall have the right to recall elected people's representatives in accord with the provisions of this Constitution." Such a provision spells out that only elected 'people's representatives' from the 75 percent of Hluttaw (Parliament) seats up for general election can be recalled by the electorate. The provision does not apply to the 25 percent of 'reserved military representatives' who are not elected by the people; a group which may not represent the desires of the electorate as they are nominated by the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services and therefore accountable to the Commander-in-Chief, not to the people.

Without the power of democratic accountability for the people, who are the primary unit of the State, the claim of the military in creating a democratic political system is nothing short of a lie. In other words, Burma would become a constitutional dictatorship by transforming itself from a de-facto government to a de-jure government. But any form of dictatorship is defective because there is no assurance that the interests of the dictators will always coincide with the interests of the community. To date, the conflicts in interests between military personnel and civilians have too often been solved by employing coercive force without care for the dignity and personal integrity of the citizens. The nature of the State remains unchanged under the new Constitution, in that military personnel are sovereign and bestowed with the right of sovereignty immunity.

In order to explicitly grant equality in dignity and rights, the current Constitution must be amended. However, the constitution is very rigid regarding the prospect for amendment. Provisions 436 (a) and (b) in Chapter 12 of 'Amendment of the Constitution', state the necessary requirement of support from 'more than seventy-five percent of all the representatives of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw' if the constitution is to be amended. According this provision, even the collective political decision of the 75 percent of elected representatives is not sufficient to guarantee amendment – as at least some, or one, military representatives must be persuaded to support the motion. It would appear that the role of elected

representatives of the people under the Constitution is therefore nothing but to submit to the whims of the military clique.

Unprincipled discrimination as enshrined in the 2008 Myanmar Constitution reverses the trend of progress in human civilization and forbids space for the assurance of one's ability to rise to the challenges of the human situation. A hierarchical social order is the outcome of the Constitutional arrangement, in which justice is only for the strong. Unequal opportunity under unprincipled discrimination is the order of the day. Unprincipled discrimination is also a matter of the allocation of political values. In this sense, unequal opportunity in enjoyment of rights implies unequal opportunity in wielding political power. Political power without accountability is dangerous to the dignity of the governed. The dignity of those allotted less political power is always in danger of violation because their role in the decision making process of the State is constitutionally confined. Without political power, it is difficult to realize the fruits of political power. And without the fruits of political power, one's dignity is frequently under assault. Is the right to dignity a fundamental right? Being human, no one loves to be discriminated against.

Dignity is inherent in all human beings, irrespective of sex, race, religion, status, nationality or place of birth. However, a commitment to equally safeguarding the dignity of all citizens under the 2008 Constitution is not inclusive because the preamble embodies only the eternal principles of justice, liberty and equality. Excluding the principle of fraternity is absurd because fraternity assures the dignity of individuals and the unity of the Nation as well as the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood. Without fraternity, the functioning of justice, liberty and equality will not be in harmony. A fraternity cannot, however, be installed unless the dignity of all of the State's members is maintained. Whenever dignity and the rights of individuals are not equal with others, some kind of discrimination occurs. However, a change in political system through the 2008 Myanmar Constitution, to ensure gender justice, equality in democratic rights and choice, non-discrimination and human dignity, can only be achieved with the blessing of the existing military clique.

Burmese Migrants Earning, Learning in Thailand

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 31, 2008

By SAW YAN NAING

A 56-year-old ethnic Shan migrant worker, Sam Htun, is typical of many Burmese who live in Thailand, grateful for the opportunity to work for a decent income.

"I feel my life in Thailand is more secure than in Burma," he says. "In Thailand, it is easier to make a living."

He lives in Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, where thousands of Burmese migrant workers have gainful employment, enabling many workers to send money home to family and loved ones.

Sam Htun earns about 4,500 baht (about US \$130) a month. In Burma, he earned 10,000 to 20,000 kyat (about \$8 to16) per month. He never had enough money to get by, he said.

He now sends about 17,000 kyat (about \$13) every month to his family in Taunggyi in Shan State in eastern Burma. He said he left Burma because he felt oppressed by Burmese authorities and because of the poor economy.

He is one of the hundreds of Shan migrant workers who stay at Kakanok 2, a Burmese migrant worker camp in San Kamphaeng in Chiang Mai Province.

The Kakanok 2 camp houses about 200 Burmese migrant workers, mostly ethnic Shan, who have legal work permits.

Most work in construction and have lived in Chaing Mai from three to eight years. A close knit community, they attend training workshops and hold ethnic celebrations on holidays and other occasions.

Much of the training is provided by a nongovernmental organization, the Human Rights and Development Foundation, which specializes on migrant labor rights.

The migrant workers have created their own worker rights group, the Migrant Workers Federation. On International Migrant Workers Day, December 18, they held a simple ceremony attended by about 200 migrants, guests and a few journalists.

When the ceremony started about 7 p.m, workers, children and elders gathered in a hall, looking happy and excited.

During the evening, there were question and answer games that served to educate workers about labor rights. For a correct answer, prizes were awarded.

“The ceremony is good because it educates migrant workers about their rights,” said migrant worker Sam Htun.

The chairman of the Migrant Workers Federation, Sai Kad, who organized the ceremony, said, “I’m glad when I see a lot of migrant workers come together and enjoy the evening. It makes me want to fight more for the rights of migrant workers.”

He said too many migrant workers still experience poor working conditions, and they didn’t know how to complain and demand compensation from employers if they are injured or denied wages.

“Before, they didn’t even know they were abused,” he said. “But they know now.”

A 26-year-old migrant worker, Sai Hla Woon, said, “I’m glad I came to this program. I learned something. We can rely on ourselves and help each other.”

“If I am mistreated now, I will go to the labor protection and welfare office,” he said.

[COMMENTARY: The Stories We Missed in 2008](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 31, 2008

By AUNG ZAW

As I was preparing to take a break for the New Year, a Burmese colleague who has extensive sources in Burma walked into my office.

I knew this individual to be one of our most avid readers—and an unsparing critic who has often alerted me to the shortcomings of our coverage. But I also knew that he was uniquely well-informed and always constructive in his criticism, so I stopped what I was doing and braced for an earful.

“Your coverage on Burma this year was excellent,” he started. “Your reports on Cyclone Nargis, the referendum, political prisoners, women’s issues, tycoons—spot on! Superb!”

I thanked him on behalf of our hardworking staff, and explained how we started every morning with an editorial meeting to go over the stories and opinion pieces of the day and to discuss the content of the monthly print edition. He listened politely as I told him how pleased we were with the success of our Web site, which has been receiving astonishing numbers of visitors.

Then he started his criticism: “You claim to be an independent news organization searching for the truth, but this year you have failed to expose the reality of the exiled opposition.”

He said we didn’t write enough about the government-in-exile—the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB)—or the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) and other umbrella organizations, and that what we did write was too soft.

“Several years ago, you wrote a good editorial about the NCGUB, but you no longer write this stuff,” he said.

I recall that editorial well. It questioned the effectiveness of the NCGUB under the leadership of its self-appointed prime minister, Dr Sein Win, cousin of detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi. Most Burmese exiles agree that Sein Win is a fine person, but they say that he is simply not articulate or media-savvy enough to be a good lobbyist for Burma’s democratic opposition.

My visitor pointed out that nearly a decade after we published our editorial, the NCGUB was still underperforming. Like many others, he noted that US officials in the Bush administration have shown little interest in meeting with the Washington-based NCGUB, preferring instead to establish contacts with rank-and-file activists living in exile in Thailand or the US.

“What about Maung Maung?” my visitor continued, referring to the general secretary of the NCUB. “You published some good articles about him last year, but you didn’t really follow up on them.”

In September 2007, at the height of the Saffron Revolution, Maung Maung upset many fellow exiles when he took credit for the monk-led uprising. My visitor was among those shocked by Maung Maung’s claims and their consequences for the pro-democracy movement.

“Maung Maung was quite effective when he was working on labor issues,” my visitor said. “Even the regime acknowledged his campaign.”

But, he added, Maung Maung undid much of the good he accomplished over the years when he made claims that undermined the credibility of exiled opposition groups.

“Do you know that the people who are now pushing hard for governments and aid groups to start sending money into Burma are using Maung Maung and the NCGUB to discredit opposition groups in exile? They are both doing a disservice to Burma and the democracy movement. Why can’t someone remove them?”

He added: “No one knows where Maung Maung lives or what he does. There is very little transparency.”

But, I argued, Maung Maung is not the only Burmese exile known to the outside world. There are others, like Bo Kyi from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners—Burma, and Shan activist Charm Tong, who are widely recognized for their excellent work.

My visitor nodded. “I agree, but my point is that the ineffective groups and politicians are having a negative impact on the image of the movement.”

I couldn’t argue with that, and my visitor also sounded more conciliatory when the topic returned to *The Irrawaddy’s* coverage of the year’s events.

“I really liked your piece on Kyaw Myint,” he said, referring to a former Wa drug lord who is also known as Michael Hu Hwa. Kyaw Myint is now a businessman based in Vancouver, Canada, where he has also been using his money to recruit exiled activists to his newly formed political party.

This prompted me to mention that we have provided extensive coverage of ethnic issues over the past year. However, I had to confess my regret that we did not write in greater depth about the fate of Shan leader Hkun Htun Oo, who is serving a long sentence at a prison in Kachin State.

This wasn’t the only ethnic-related issue we had failed to cover, my guest insisted. “You don’t expose those ethnic groups that are just political opportunists who will take sides with whoever is in power in Burma,” he complained.

“What about some of the ethnic leaders in exile? I’ve heard that some of them are ready to get on the next plane to Rangoon—they’re just waiting for the visas.”

This was intriguing, but he didn’t divulge any details, so I said we would need more information before we could follow up on it. I told him that if we could confirm what he was saying, we would publish a full report.

He then turned his attention to another group: the so-called “third force,” consisting of Burmese and foreign academics who profess neutrality in the struggle between the junta and pro-democracy forces.

“I heard you received a lot of flack for your coverage of the EU Burma Day meeting in Brussels, where there was a lot of talk about the third force inside Burma.”

I responded that this was a touchy subject, but my well-informed friend wouldn’t let the matter rest there.

“You are always crowing about your investigative reporting and independent journalism, but you don’t even educate your readers about who the third force groups are—their shady backgrounds and who is behind them. It could be a real exposé. But your reports on them are just hit and miss.”

I told him that there are people now quietly monitoring what the third force and the “new opposition” groups are doing in Burma. I added that we would soon have some exclusive news to report on them.

“Don’t be shy about going after these opportunists,” my visitor said. “If you don’t demonstrate that you are watchdog, you will become just another lapdog instead.”

I wasn’t sure how to take this, but before I could let it sink in, my guest touched another nerve.

“By the way, have any of your donors threatened you because of your criticism of the UN and Ibrahim Gambari’s mission, or for questioning the value of humanitarian assistance to Burma as long as the junta still runs the whole show?”

I immediately came to the defense of our donor’s honor. “I swear to God, there has been no pressure from our donors—only expressions of respect for our work here. We are immensely grateful to them for respecting our editorial independence.”

He smiled at this, as if to show he understood what I really wanted to say. Then his look and tone became even more conspiratorial.

“I’m no Deep Throat, but I can tell you some things, if you’re inclined to listen.”

I nodded, and he began: “There are those who say that aid to border-based groups will soon be a thing of the past. They say that cutting off assistance to the troublesome exiles in Thailand is the only way to end the conflict in Burma.”

I immediately countered that no one could be stupid enough to believe such nonsense. I pointed out that many of the so-called “cross border” groups, such as the human rights organizations and the school projects and Dr Cynthia Maung’s clinic, were providing invaluable assistance to hundreds of thousands of people inside Burma—a fact that everyone acknowledges.

“But there are some donors and policymakers who are only too happy to ignore these facts,” he said. “On the other hand, if they hear something negative about the groups on the border, they are quite happy to pass it along.”

We discussed this sad state of affairs for a while, noting with disappointment that despite *The Irrawaddy’s* efforts to highlight the degree of cooperation between nascent civil-society groups inside Burma and exiled groups along the border, especially during the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis, this was a story that has gone largely unnoticed by the outside world.

We agreed that if anything good has come out of these two major crises, which struck Burma within a year of each other, it was that they served to strengthen the bond between Burmese inside and outside the country.

“But this cooperation is now in danger because some aid groups want to divide them,” said my visitor.

I told him to stop being so alarmist, and assured him that if I detected such a policy taking shape, I would be the first to report on it.

At this point, my guest decided to tackle another subject that he felt we had been remiss in covering over the past year.

“What about the National League for Democracy? Your editorials on Suu Kyi and the rest of the party’s aging leadership have been too soft. Why don’t you write about how they seem to be just hanging on for dear life, without doing anything to advance the country’s political situation?”

“They’re not just clinging to survival,” I retorted. “They’re waiting for Suu Kyi’s release and for the junta to begin a dialogue with them.”

“But dialogue is not going to happen. You know it, and so do they.”

Before I could say any more on the perennial subject of the regime’s lack of good faith and its stubborn determination to avoid an honest dialogue at all costs, my guest changed topics again.

“You criticize China every chance you get, but why don’t you mention India’s disgraceful Burma policy? Right now, New Delhi is calling for the international community to tackle the problem of terrorism in

Pakistan, but they don't seem to mind shaking hands with the terrorist regime in Naypyidaw. What hypocrites!"

Then he abruptly shifted to another subject that evidently filled him with indignation.

"Why don't you write about prostitution in the Irrawaddy delta? I've heard that even sex workers are chasing after the aid money that's making its way into the region," he said.

"Follow the money.' Isn't that what you journalists say when you want to get to the bottom of some dirty business? You should be taking lessons from the sex workers."

I thanked him for his suggestion, but I refrained from mentioning that our local stringers were not much good at chasing after money. In fact, they're lucky to get US \$250 a month from us, which is about all our donors are willing to allow for local staff inside Burma—even though they are facing 20-year prison sentences if caught working for *The Irrawaddy*.

All of this was becoming a bit depressing to think about, so I was glad when my guest decided he had offered enough criticism for one session. We exchanged New Year's greetings, and he left me to my own thoughts.

It had been a challenging conversation, and it certainly made me wonder how we would ever live up to our readers' expectations. But I vowed to myself that next year there would be fewer gaps in our coverage of Burma.