

31/12/2008

[Activists calling for release of Suu Kyi arrested](#)

AP – 30 December, 2008

[Myanmar signs gas deal with SKorea, India, China: state media](#)

AFP - 29 December, 2008

[Nearly 300 immigrants feared dead off Indian coast](#)

AP – 29 December, 2008

[UN Offers Development Aid in Exchange for Political Prisoners](#)

Irrawaddy – 29 December, 2008

[EDITORIAL: UN's 'Stockholm Syndrome' Won't Work in Burma](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 29, 2008

[U.N. Mulls Reengaging Burma With More Aid: Diplomacy Unable to Yield Political Reforms](#)

Washington Post - December 28, 2008; A16

[China Signs Burmese Gas Deal for 30-year Supply](#)

Irrawaddy - Friday, December 26, 2008

[UN Passes Strong Resolution on Burma Human Rights Abuses](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 25, 2008

[UN condemns human rights violations in Myanmar](#)

AP – 25 December, 2008

[More International Pressure in 2009: Burmese Diplomat](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 24, 2008

[Thailand's Burma Policy Set to Change under New Premier](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 25, 2008

[Korea Rejects Charge of Rights Abuse in Burma](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 24, 2008

[Russia Urges Burma to Cooperate with UN](#)

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 23, 2008

[Suu Kyi honorary member of 'Council of Women World Leaders'](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 22 December 2008 18:41

[Burma's health care cripplingly under funded: MSF](#)

Mizzima News - Monday, 22 December 2008 22:12

[Burma One of the Worst Crises in the World: MSF](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 22, 2008

[Detained North Koreans to face trial on New Year's Eve](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 22 December 2008 21:07

[Myanmar arrests 19 North Korean defectors: police](#)

AFP - Dec 20, 2008

[MYANMAR: More cyclone relief needed - report](#)

19 Dec 2008 10:18:22 GMT

[Will ASEAN's charter cure Burma's ills?](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 19 December 2008 16:08

[EU to give €40.5 million in humanitarian aid to Burma](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 19 December 2008 19:41

[Burma likely to announce 'Election Law' on Independence Day](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 19 December 2008 20:35

19/12/2008

[EU provides extra 40 million euros in aid to Myanmar](#)

AFP – 18 December 2008

[Myanmar blames "extravagant" Americans for crisis](#)

Reuters - Thu Dec 18, 2008 9:43am GMT

[Czech Republic, East Timor offer asylum to Burmese rebels](#)

Mizzima - Thursday, 18 December 2008 19:53

[30 Myanmar refugees accepted](#)

Straits Times / AFP - Dec 18, 2008

[Burma cancels license of 84 tour companies](#)

Mizzima - Thursday, 18 December 2008 22:07

[Will ASEAN's charter cure Burma's ills?](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 19 December 2008 16:08

18/12/2008

[UN chief criticizes Myanmar and Zimbabwe](#)

AP– 17 December 2008

[Burmese migrants deported from Malaysia after protest](#)

DVB - Dec 18, 2008

[Regime Shrugs Off Effects on Burma of Global Economic Crisis](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

[How the Regime Punishes Political Prisoners' Families](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

[Reading letter sent to Than Shwe fetches prison term](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 17 December 2008 22:07

[Myanmar, Thailand to raise momentum of cooperation next year](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-17 16:47

[Desperate Decisions](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

[NEWS ANALYSIS : Cooler Approach, but Business as Usual with Junta](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

[COMMENTARY: A Toast to Asean](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

17/12/2008

[Myanmar journalists face intimidation, pressure from junta](#)

The Jakarta Post | Wed, 12/17/2008 11:14 AM | World

[ASEAN summit to be held in February](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 22:05

[Pro-junta group gearing up to contest elections](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 18:10

[More Calls for Ban to Visit Burma](#)

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 16, 2008

[Burmese women in exile honoured with Madeleine K. Albright Award](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 17:09

Opinion: [Glimmers of hope for Burma](#)

Partnership for a Secure America | December 16th, 2008

[Junta bans popular Buddhist monk's sermon](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 19:25

[Afro-Asian organization demands release of Burmese political prisoners](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 19:45

[Burma: Lawyer's Testimony Highlights Distorted Justice: ASEAN Should Monitor Jailed Activists](#)

Human Rights Watch - December 16, 2008

[AK-47s—Made in Wa State](#)

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 16, 2008

[Rice yield down in Bogalay after cyclone](#)

DVB - Dec 16, 2008

[Prince Alwaleed Receives Myanmar Ambassador to Saudi Arabia to Discuss Philanthropic & Economic Issues](#)

UAE Daily News - 15 December, 2008 07:00:00

16/12/2008

[Thailand's new PM likely to be more 'pro-Active' on Burma: Activist](#)

Mizzima Monday, 15 December 2008 20:49

[Activists urge Canada to assign special envoy to Burma](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 15 December 2008 21:43

[Burmese Defense Lawyer Flees to Thailand, Blasts Regime](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 15, 2008

[COMMENTARY: Isolation or Engagement? It's Than Shwe's Choice](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 15, 2008

15/12/2008

[UN chief visit would help Myanmar: EU envoy](#)

AFP – 15 December 2008

['Momentous' day for ASEAN as charter comes into force](#)

AFP – 15 December 2008

[Former Myanmar dictator's daughter released from house arrest](#)

AFP – 13 December 2008

[Nobel laureates launch appeal for Aung San Suu Kyi](#)

AFP – 13 December 2008

[Gems auction in Myanmar](#)

Straits Times / AFP - Dec 13, 2008

[Chin, Faced with Food Shortage, Entering Thailand](#)

Irrawaddy - Friday, December 12, 2008

[Rangoon Residents Suffer Power Cuts](#)

Irrawaddy - Friday, December 12, 2008

[Peter Hitchens: Inside Burma - one of the world's most beautiful and ugliest countries and the last ghost of the British Empire](#)

The Mail on Sunday - 14th December 2008

[Jailed Activist's Wife Tells Story](#)

Radio Free Asia - 2008-12-13

12/12/2008

[Harn Yawnghwe: Ethnic efforts not in vain](#)

SHAN – 11 December 2008

[Myanmar working on Aung San Suu Kyi detention appeal: party](#)

AFP – 12 December 2008

[Suu Kyi Denied Meeting with Her Lawyer](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 11, 2008

[Nobel peace laureates speak out for Aung San Suu Kyi](#)

AFP – 11 December 2008

[Myanmar releases opposition activist after 8 weeks](#)

Associated Press / IHT- Thursday, December 11, 2008

[Illegal Migrant Workers Arrested; Others Hide in Jungle](#)

Irrawaddy - Friday, December 12, 2008

[Ashin Gambira awarded honorary citizenship by Italy](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 12 December 2008 13:16

[Unhappy Human Rights Day in Burma](#)

UPI Asia - December 11, 2008

[Is UWSA Preparing for Clash with Junta?](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 11, 2008

[NEWS ANALYSIS: Junta Demand for Higher Rice Production Derided](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 11, 2008

11/12/2008

[U.S. to provide \\$5 mln more for Myanmar relief aid](#)

Reuters - Wed Dec 10, 2008 8:32pm EST

[UN urges help for 6 million in long-term limbo](#)

AP – 10 December 2008

[Myanmar at centre of elephant smuggling trade: report](#)

AFP - December 10, 2008

[Junta Has Crushed Peaceful Dissent: Laura Bush](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 11, 2008

[Detained leader Min Ko Naing freezing in prison, needs eye care: Sister](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 10 December 2008 18:31

[Russian business presence becoming stronger in Burma](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 10 December 2008 19:22

[Myanmar puts off again opening of second border trade zone](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-10 19:33:28

[India allows limited wheat exports to Myanmar, Nepal](#)

Reuters India, Thu Dec 11, 2008 10:56am IST

[Burma's Nuclear Temptation – by Bertil Lintner](#)

YaleGlobal Dec 10, 2008

10/12/2008

[Has international diplomacy on Burma touched its zenith? Commentary by Dr. Sein Myint](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 10 December 2008 13:07

[Eight ministers and Rangoon's mayor to resign soon](#)

Mizzima News - Tuesday, 09 December 2008 18:13

[Burma: Struggling for human rights – Interview with HRW's David Scott Mathieson](#)

Mizzima News - Wednesday, 10 December 2008 12:25

[Isolated, but Not Insulated](#)

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 9, 2008

[More Burmese Workers Leave Malaysia](#)

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 9, 2008

[EDITORIAL: No Time Like the Present](#)

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 9, 2008

[How Burma's opposition lost its fear](#)

Independent - Wednesday, 10 December 2008

[ASEAN human rights body: Will it have an impact on Myanmar's junta?](#)

Jakarta Post - Wed, 12/10/2008 10:51 AM

[Ban urges "group of friends", corporates to influence Burma](#)

Mizzima News - Tuesday, 09 December 2008 22:15

[Life on Myanmar's biofuels plantations](#)

Straits Times - December 10, 2008 Wednesday, 03:42 PM

9/12/2008

[Asian Lawmakers Push UN Chief on Burma](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 8, 2008

[U.N. must be tough on Burma's dictators](#)

UPI Asia - December 08, 2008

[UN chief frustrated over lack of democratic steps in Myanmar](#)

AFP – 6 December 2008

[UN Role 'Not Enough': Ban](#)

Irrawaddy - Saturday, December 6, 2008

[UN boss rejects Burma visit plea](#)

BBC News - 2008/12/06 01:50:26 GMT

[UN Chief Will Visit Burma Again, Only when Conditions Right](#)

VOA - 6 December 2008

[Asean engagement continues](#)

Straits Times - Dec 5, 2008

[Myanmar strives to reduce malaria victims by half in 2010](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-09 10:57:40

[UNICEF to build disaster-resistant schools in Myanmar](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-08

[Myanmar, India to trade in euros, Singapore dollars](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-08 21:37:44

[WFP resumes buying local rice in Burma](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 08 December 2008 21:36

[Win Tin, Khin Maung Swe to be members of CRPP](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 05 December 2008 23:24

[Price of Burmese Mobiles Slashed, but Call Charges Soar](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 8, 2008

5/12/2008

[Doctor visits Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi: witnesses](#)

AFP - 4 November 2008

[Chinese, Myanmar FMs hold talks in Myanmar new capital](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-04 22:14:16

[Veteran journalist-politician Win Tin hospitalized](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 05 December 2008 13:51

[NEWS ANALYSIS: Burmese Try to Anticipate Junta's Next Election Move](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 4, 2008

[COMMENTARY: The Drama of 2008](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 4, 2008

4/12/2008

[Ban Rules Out Visit to Burma](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 4, 2008

[Burma's jailed hip hop singers shifted to remote prisons](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 03 December 2008 22:20

[Burmese comedian & blogger nominated for RSF award](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 03 December 2008 21:38

3/12/2008

[Ex-world leaders urge U.N.'s Ban to go to Myanmar](#)

Reuters - Wed Dec 3, 2008 10:39am IST

[Burma - Bangladesh Border Trade Normalizes](#)

Narinjara News - 12/3/2008

[Burmese PM Says Jobs Aplenty for Returnees](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 3, 2008

[The future of Burma's nonviolent campaign for democracy](#)

DVB - Dec 2, 2008

2/12/2008

[Two-thirds of Myanmar HIV cases involve youths: UNICEF](#)

AFP – 1 December 2008

[Thousands Die Needlessly Because Junta Spends Too Little on AIDS, Group Says](#)

New York Times - December 2, 2008

[An unnatural disaster in Burma](#)

Boston Globe | December 2, 2008

[Gambira, Five Others Sent to Remote Prisons](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 1, 2008

[Indo-Burma border closed for Indian elections](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 01 December 2008 19:35

[NEWS ANALYSIS: Silencing Burma's Monks](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 1, 2008

[Laughter defying Burma's junta](#)

BBC: From Our Own Correspondent – 29 November 2008

1/12/2008

[European envoy urges Myanmar opposition to contest polls – Summary](#)

Deutsche Presse-Agentur/Earthtimes – 29 November 2008

[Myanmar fights AIDS with national awareness](#)

Xinhua - 1 December 2008

[Generals plot victory in 2010 Burma election](#)

AFP/Bangkok Post - November 29, 2008

[Journalists caught in crackdown by Myanmar junta](#)

Associated Press - 30 November 2008

[Border Talks Between Burma and Bangladesh Resume](#)

Narinjara News - 11/29/2008

[Chinese FM to visit Nepal, Myanmar](#)

Xinhua – 27 November 2008

[China, Myanmar pledge to promote bilateral relations](#)

Xinhua – 29 November 2008

[The unquenchable fire in Burmese hearts](#)

Christian Science Monitor - December 1, 2008

[Activists calling for release of Suu Kyi arrested](#)

AP – 30 December, 2008

YANGON, Myanmar — Nine activists were arrested in Myanmar's commercial capital Tuesday during a march calling for the release of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, witnesses said.

The eight men and one woman from Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party were grabbed and shoved into waiting trucks by plainclothes police officers outside the old parliament building in Yangon, witnesses said on condition of anonymity because of fear of government retribution.

The protesters started their march at the party's headquarters and walked silently along Yangon's main road for about 30 minutes before they were detained, witnesses said. Some carried a banner calling for Suu Kyi's release.

It was not immediately clear where the NLD members were taken.

NLD spokesman Nyan Win said he heard that female party member Htet Htet Oo Wei was among those who marched but he could not confirm her arrest.

Htet Htet Oo Wei has been arrested several times in the past and was detained for about a month in May after she and nearly 20 party members marched from party headquarters to Suu Kyi's house.

Suu Kyi — the face of Myanmar's beleaguered opposition — has been detained continuously since May 2003 despite a worldwide campaign calling on the country's military rulers to release her. Her house arrest was extended for another year in May.

Myanmar has been under military rule since 1962. The current junta came to power in 1988 after crushing a nationwide pro-democracy uprising.

It held elections in 1990 but refused to honor the results after Suu Kyi's party won a landslide victory. Since then, it has drafted a constitution that voters approved in May. It paves the way for elections in 2010.

Critics have dismissed the junta's democratic road map, saying it is little more than a veiled effort by the generals to remain the dominant force in politics.

[Myanmar signs gas deal with SKorea, India, China: state media](#)

AFP - 29 December, 2008

YANGON — Military-run Myanmar has signed a deal with South Korean and Indian companies to pipe natural gas from the energy-rich nation's offshore fields to China, state media reported Monday.

The Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise inked the deal last Wednesday with South Korean companies Daewoo and Korea Gas Corporation and Indian energy firms ONGC Videsh and GAIL to supply gas to the China National United Oil Corporation.

"The agreement was signed to export natural gas to China from Shwe natural gas project at Block A-1 and A-3 at Rakhine coastal region through pipelines," the New Light of Myanmar newspaper said.

The paper gave no other details of the project, but Beijing media reported last month that China was planning to start construction on a gas pipeline to Myanmar in early 2009.

The two blocks are off the coast of western Rakhine state near the border with Bangladesh, where impoverished Myanmar has discovered huge reserves of natural gas which are helping prop up the military junta.

Myanmar, which has been ruled by the military since 1962, is under economic sanctions by the United States and Europe because of its human rights record and long-running detention of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

But the impact of the sanctions has been weakened as neighbours such as China, India and Thailand spend billions of dollars for a share of Myanmar's oil and gas reserves to solve energy problems at home.

China is a key ally of Myanmar, and is also the top buyer of its abundant natural resources including gems, jade, pearls, timber and gas.

Figures from 2006 showed that 13 foreign oil companies are working on 33 projects in the country, while gas exports earned the regime 2.7 billion dollars last year, a Myanmar newspaper has said.

The country's economy, however, has been crippled by decades of mismanagement, and Myanmar is one of the poorest nations in the world with per capita GDP well below that of nearby Laos and Bangladesh.

Nearly 300 immigrants feared dead off Indian coast

AP – 29 December, 2008

NEW DELHI: More than 300 illegal immigrants were missing and feared dead off India's eastern coast after they jumped from a rickety boat that had been drifting for 13 days and tried to swim to shore, an official said Monday. Authorities rescued 102 others on the boat.

Authorities were searching for the missing people in the waters near the Andaman Islands, where they were believed to have jumped overboard, said Vijay Singh, an Indian coast guard spokesman.

Roughly 300 people from Bangladesh and Myanmar had tried to swim to the Andaman Islands by the time Indian officials found the boat and its 102 remaining passengers Saturday, he said.

The rescued people were brought to Port Blair, the Andaman capital, Singh said.

The Andamans are a remote chain of Indian-ruled islands some 850 miles (1367 kilometers) off India's east coast. They lie closer to Thailand and Myanmar.

The illegal immigrants said they had been detained by Thai authorities for illegally entering Thai waters before they were sent back out to sea, Singh said.

Police Lieutenant General Chatchawal Suksomjit, commander of Thailand Immigration Office, disputed that claim.

"Thai immigration office will never send illegal immigrants back to their countries by putting them back in the boat then let them go," Chatchawal said. "Normally, when we arrest them, we will send them back through immigration check points along the border."

Poor Bangladeshis often pay up to \$300 a head to trafficking syndicates to carry them to Thailand or Malaysia to search for better jobs. They often travel in dangerous boats that have been known to capsize and sink.

The Bangladeshis are sometimes joined by Myanmar refugees, mostly Muslims known as Rohingyas, who have fled Myanmar's military junta for Bangladesh.

Malaysia estimates there are 500,000 to 700,000 illegal immigrants in the country in addition to more than 2 million legal foreign workers, who mostly work in low-paying menial jobs on construction sites and restaurants. But rights groups says there are 5 million undocumented workers in the country.

UN Offers Development Aid in Exchange for Political Prisoners

Irrawaddy – 29 December, 2008

By WAI MOE The United Nations has offered the Burmese military government a financial incentive to release the more than 2,000 political prisoners who languish in Burmese jails and initiate democratic change in the country, according to a *Washington Post* report on Sunday.

Regarded by many as the leading political broadsheet in the US, the *Washington Post* said that the UN is "trying to entice" the Burmese generals who rule the country "with fresh promises of development money."

According to the report, UN Special Envoy to Burma Ibrahim Gambari presented the outline of his strategy in a confidential paper to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon last month.

In the paper, Gambari reportedly endorses building on the relations Burma established with the international community after the Cyclone Nargis disaster in May, as well as urging an increase in development assistance to Burma and recommending that wealthy countries allow Burma access to foreign investment.

“In the months ahead, the UN leadership will press the Obama administration to relax the US [sanctions] policy on Burma and to open the door to a return of international financial institutions, including the World Bank,” *The Post* said.

The report noted that the US and Britain have always resisted offering the Burmese regime financial perks, arguing that the junta should not be rewarded for bad behavior.

However, this would not be the first time that financial carrots have been offered to the Burmese junta in exchange for political development in the country.

In 1998, the UN and the World Bank offered the ruling military regime US \$1 billion in financial and humanitarian aid in exchange for opening a dialogue with the opposition.

And in 2000, the UN offered the generals \$1 billion again, this time to hand over control of the government to the UN.

Both times the junta turned down the offers, condemning them in state media as “bananas for monkeys.”

According to the *Washington Post* report, the UN had also opened discussions with Denmark, Japan, the Netherlands and Norway to find a way of preventing misuse of development assistance and ensuring that aid gets into the hands of the neediest Burmese.

Although economically one of the world’s poorest nations, military-ruled Burma last year exported some \$2.7 billion in natural gas to Thailand. The junta also recently signed a 30-year deal to supply natural gas to China, which will build oil and gas pipelines from Burma’s Kyauk Pyu Port on the Bay of Bengal to its southwest Yunnan Province. The pipeline deal is reportedly worth \$2.5 billion to the junta. Nevertheless, the *Economist Intelligence Unit* estimated Burma’s gross fixed investment to be no more than \$10 billion this year.

Top UN officials, including Gambari, have urged China and India to lean on the Burmese military regime to release political prisoners and to provide a political opening for the opposition in the 2010 elections, *The Post* said.

The *Washington Post* also said that if the junta acts on Gambari’s new initiative positively, Ban Ki-moon would visit Burma again.

However, Gambari has also stated that he himself would not return to Burma until there were signs of political progress in the country.

He said that before returning to Burma there would have to be concrete results, such as the release of political prisoners and moves toward holding the 2010 elections in a free and fair manner.

According to diplomatic sources, Gambari has been criticized by Western countries for his ineffectiveness in Burma. Recently, Burma’s representative to the UN, Kyaw Tint Swe—writing in a confidential report that was leaked by the Burmese Ministry of Foreign Affairs—said that some Western countries have attempted to replace Gambari with someone who is “influenced by the West.”

But Gambari is still secure in his job, with support from Russia and Asian countries, Kyaw Tint Swe said.

There was no immediate response from the Burmese regime to the reported UN offer. However, Burmese state media constantly reprints messages urging Burmese citizens to “oppose foreign nationals interfering in the internal affairs of the State.”

[EDITORIAL: UN's 'Stockholm Syndrome' Won't Work in Burma](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 29, 2008

This year we saw many twist and turns and ups and downs in Burma—but the tragedy of Burma seems to have no end in sight.

Early this year, the regime surprised the world by announcing that it would go ahead with a constitutional referendum implementing part of its seven point road map to prolong military rule. UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari accepted the proposal, while pushing for an independent monitoring body—but without considering the opposition parties' stand, let alone the opinion of most people of Burma, who want to see regime change.

Political issues were swept away by the deadly cyclone that slammed into lower Burma in May, killing more than 100,000 people and making millions homeless.

The international community responded to the disaster with sympathy and offers of material aid. The US, Britain and France sent warships to the area, loaded with food, medicines and other supplies. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon toured the cyclone-flattened region and met leaders of the military government, urging them to allow more aid into Burma.

Not surprisingly, the junta opened the door slightly to aid agencies after dragging its heels on the dispatch of emergency relief to the cyclone victims.

At the same time, the regime went ahead with its sham referendum, claiming 92 percent approval for its proposed constitution.

Then, to the surprise of many, the regime launched its “shock and awe” strategy, handing out heavy prison sentences to prominent opposition leaders and humanitarian workers and sending them separately to remote prisons.

Now it is shocking to learn that Gambari has suggested that governments should offer Burma financial incentives to free its political prisoners, estimated to number more than 2,000—including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi—and to initiate democratic change.

The Nigerian diplomat must be insane to think that the corrupt generals who terrorized the whole nation can be bribed into compromise.

The influential *Washington Post* has reported: “In the months ahead, the UN leadership will press the Obama administration to relax US policy on Burma and to open the door to a return of international financial institutions, including the World Bank.”

Several years ago, when the World Bank offered the Burmese regime US \$1 billion in return for political reform, it was told, in effect: “Don't give us bananas, we are not monkeys.”

Minutes of a meeting between Gambari and a UN Burma team led by Ambassador Kyaw Tint Swe—obtained by *The Irrawaddy*—seem to suggest that Gambari, a citizen of one of Africa's failed states, is giving advice to some officials from a failed state of Southeast Asia.

The Irrawaddy reported that Gambari had told the Burmese team that if there was progress towards reconciliation in Burma before the new administration took office, Washington might modify its Burma policy.

The *Washington Post*, in its report, quoted the Nigerian diplomat as saying: “It cannot be business as usual. We need new thinking on how to engage with Myanmar [Burma] in a way that will bring tangible results.”

The UN, he said, cannot rely simply on “the power of persuasion with too little in the [diplomatic] toolbox.”

Gambari appears to be suffering from the “Stockholm syndrome”—held captive by the deceptions of the Burmese regime, he is in danger of succumbing to them. If he thinks that the UN and the international community can bribe the regime to free political prisoners and Suu Kyi, his understanding of Burma is indeed questionable. It clearly shows that the UN envoy is out of juice.

More dangerously, Gambari—snubbed by the regime and opposition leaders alike—appears to be deluded.

It cannot be business as usual to allow the UN and Gambari to work as normal on Burma. The UN's engagement with the regime must be strictly monitored to ensure that it is transparent and accountable.

The Burmese generals must be laughing at Gambari and his proposal. The country's political prisoners, however, have nothing to laugh about. They will be asking whether a more effective and better informed UN special envoy cannot be appointed.

Persuasion and bribes won't move the captors of more than 2,000 innocent people.

[U.N. Mulls Reengaging Burma With More Aid: Diplomacy Unable to Yield Political Reforms](#)

Washington Post - December 28, 2008; A16

By Colum Lynch and Michael Abramowitz

UNITED NATIONS -- International sanctions and [Laura Bush's](#) personal intervention did not make Burma's generals ease their political oppression. Neither did quiet diplomacy, nor the devastation of a cyclone.

So the [United Nations](#) is attempting a new approach: It is trying to entice the generals with fresh promises of development money.

According to senior U.N. officials, special envoy [Ibrahim Gambari](#) has proposed that nations offer Burma financial incentives to free more than 2,000 political prisoners, including Nobel laureate [Aung San Suu Kyi](#), and to open the country to democratic change.

In the months ahead, the U.N. leadership will press the Obama administration to relax U.S. policy on Burma and to open the door to a return of international financial institutions, including the [World Bank](#). The bank left in 1987 because Burma, which is officially known as Myanmar, did not implement economic and political reforms.

"It cannot be business as usual. We need new thinking on how to engage with Myanmar in a way that will bring tangible results," Gambari said in an interview, adding that the United Nations cannot rely simply on "the power of persuasion with too little in the [diplomatic] toolbox."

But critics characterize the strategy as a desperate attempt to salvage a diplomatic process that has so deteriorated that Suu Kyi and Senior Gen. [Than Shwe](#), Burma's military ruler, declined to meet with Gambari during his last trip there, in August. Gambari, critics say, is simply grasping to show progress in moving a regime that has no intention of embracing democratic reform.

The United States and [Britain](#) have resisted financial perks, arguing that Burma should not be rewarded for bad behavior. They are not "under any illusions that sanctions would solve Burma's problems," said Jared Genser, Suu Kyi's Washington-based attorney and president of the advocacy group Freedom Now. But "if you flood them with development assistance, it will only go to the junta's favored few," Genser said.

Gambari outlined his strategy in a confidential paper he presented last month to U.N. Secretary General [Ban Ki-moon](#). In it, according to senior U.N. officials who have seen the document, Gambari endorses building on the relations Burma established with the outside world after [Cyclone Nargis](#) struck the country in May. He also calls for an increase in development assistance to Burma and proposes that wealthy countries expand the nation's access to foreign investment, the officials added.

One key initiative involves the establishment of an Economic and Social Forum to serve as a vehicle for channeling money and coordinating international development efforts. To prevent Burma from steering assistance to its supporters in the government, the United Nations has begun discussing with Denmark, [Japan](#), the Netherlands and Norway how to ensure that money would go to the neediest Burmese.

Gambari and other top U.N. officials are also urging countries with influence over Burma, especially [China](#) and [India](#), to lean on the government to release political prisoners and to provide a political opening for the opposition in upcoming elections. "What we need is for the U.S. and the U.K. to be softer and for the Chinese and the Indians to be harder," one senior U.N. official said.

Gambari reportedly hopes to detail the United Nations' latest thinking to Burmese leaders early next year, but only if the country's ruling general agrees to meet with him. If Gambari's strategy receives a positive

response, Ban, the first U.N. chief to visit Burma in more than 40 years, would make his second trip to the country.

Burma has been ruled by a military dictatorship since 1962, when Gen. Ne Win expelled foreigners and broke with the outside world in pursuit of "Burmese socialism." Pro-democracy demonstrations 20 years ago offered the promise of a new government elected by the people, but the generals put Suu Kyi under house arrest in July 1989 and ignored national elections in 1990 that her party, the [National League for Democracy](#), won in a landslide.

Burma has one of the world's worst living standards, despite holding sizable oil and natural gas reserves and the world's largest deposits of precious gems. Nargis, which killed more than 100,000 people and left 2.4 million homeless, only added to the challenges.

The Burmese leadership has recently consolidated its power in advance of national elections in 2010. As Burma buckled from Nargis's blow, the military pushed through a referendum on a new constitution that would effectively exclude the National League for Democracy from the election.

The Bush administration's position is that it makes no sense to engage with the Burmese government until the generals signal that they are interested in reconciling with the opposition. That could include, for instance, releasing Suu Kyi from house arrest or freeing other political prisoners.

"We have not been against dialogue, but we have felt that dialogue needed to be preconditioned," said Dennis Wilder, senior director for Asian affairs on the [National Security Council](#). "We just feel that it's egregious that for two decades Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest. We find it very hard to perceive a direct dialogue with the Burmese under those circumstances."

In recent years, the administration has tried to ratchet up pressure on Burma through sanctions aimed at restricting the income of the military rulers and their associates. In the summer, Congress banned the import of Burmese jade, a key source of income for Burma's government.

At the same time, the United States stepped up humanitarian efforts in the wake of Nargis, sending about \$75 million in aid both inside the country and to refugee camps on the border with Thailand.

All these efforts appear to have made little headway with the generals, who have increased arrests of dissidents in recent months, according to U.S. officials and human rights advocates. Bush administration officials suspect that Burmese authorities are stalling in the hopes that they might be able to work with the administration of President-elect [Barack Obama](#), who has repeatedly made clear his interest in opening dialogues with countries scorned by Bush.

But Burma is far from a priority for the incoming administration, and it is not certain that new officials would change course.

Obama, [Vice President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) and Secretary of [State-designate Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) co-sponsored the jade bill, and few expect that they will move to relax sanctions soon after taking office.

The Obama transition team declined last week to comment on the Gambari strategy or a new thrust in U.S.-Burma relations.

Some international diplomats note that the United Nations' push to bring about political change in Burma has been undercut by the inability of influential governments, principally the United States and China, to agree on a strategy.

"One of the main problems is that we are split and the junta can play us against one another," said Kjell Magne Bondevik, a former Norwegian prime minister.

"China and India today have huge investments in Burma, with no preconditions as far as I know on delivering democracy," Bondevik said.

Some U.N. delegates remain skeptical that Gambari would be able to deliver on promises of increased assistance. "I don't think any country now is in a position to offer financial incentives to Myanmar, in view of the financial crisis," said a senior diplomat from a neighboring country.

[China Signs Burmese Gas Deal for 30-year Supply](#)

Irrawaddy - Friday, December 26, 2008

By WAI MOE The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has concluded a 30-year deal to buy natural gas from Burma, the Chinese Corp announced on Friday.

CNPC said in a press release that it signed an agreement with Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, South Korea's Daewoo International, India's Oil & Natural Gas Corp Videsh Limited and Gail (India) Limited in Rangoon on December 24.

The signing guarantees that energy-hungry China can fill a portion of its energy demand for nature gas from Burma's offshore Blocks A-1 and A-3 in the Bay of Bengal for at least 30 years.

In the two offshore fields, South Korea's Daewoo International Corp owns a 51 percent share; Myanmar Oil & Gas Enterprise, 15 percent; India's Oil & Natural Gas Corp, 17 percent; Gail, 8.5 percent; and Korea Gas, 8.5 percent.

At the end of 2007, Burma had an estimated 21.19 trillion cubic feet of nature gas reserves.

"Under the agreement, which cements a preliminary deal reached in June, pipelines will be constructed to export natural gas from Myanmar [Burma] to China's Southwest provinces," CNPC said.

"Myanmar [Burma] will also be able to tap the pipeline running across its territory to promote economic development once the gas starts flowing, which is expected to happen in 2013."

Analysts note that China had been competing with India, Thailand, South Korea and Japan for Burma's nature gas.

Meanwhile, Burma's state-run *The New Light of Myanmar* reported on Friday that Maj-Gen Htay Oo, the Burmese Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation, met with the new chairman of Daewoo International Corp, Jae Yong Kin, in Rangoon on December 25. Htay Oo is also secretary-general of the Burmese junta's mass organization Union Solidarity and Development Association.

In early 2009, China is scheduled to build oil and gas pipelines from Kyaukpyu, a port on the Bay of Bengal, to its southwest Yunnan Province. China and Burma agreed to the US \$2.5 billion pipeline project in November.

"The long-awaited China-Myanmar [Burma] pipeline is expected to provide an alternative route for China's crude imports from the Middle East and Africa and ease the country's worries of its over-dependence on energy transportation through the Strait of Malacca," China Daily reported on November 19.

Analysts say China's oil and gas pipelines through Burma to Yunnan Province and the up- grading of the Kyaukpyu Port is part of China's two-ocean strategy in geopolitics, involving the extension of its influence in both the Pacific and India oceans.

"An outlet on the Indian Ocean would add a new dimension to China's spatial relations with the world," said Voon Phin Keong, director of the Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies, in a working paper in April. "It would enable China to overcome its 'single-ocean strategy' and to realize what would constitute a highly significant plan for a 'two-ocean strategy'."

The move reduces China's dependence on the Straits of Malacca and its exposure to potential risks, the scholar added.

Apart from China, Thailand is also a major buyer of Burma's nature gas, purchasing at least US \$2.7 billion in 2007.

[UN Passes Strong Resolution on Burma Human Rights Abuses](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 25, 2008

By SAW YAN NAING The UN General Assembly has adopted by a vote of nearly four to one a resolution calling on Burma to free all political prisoners, including detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and criticizing the human rights record of the Burmese regime.

The resolution, which addressed the issue of human rights in Burma, was carried on Wednesday by 80 votes to 25, with 45 abstentions.

It urged the Burmese government to halt arrests of political activists and expressed concern about incidents of torture and sexual abuse and the crackdown on peaceful protesters in September 2007.

The resolution also voiced concern over the process of the junta's so-called "seven-step roadmap" toward democracy, including the planned general election, 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.

An unnamed Burmese UN representative later rejected the resolution and accused the UN Assembly of "blatant interference" in his country's internal political affairs. He said that although Burma would not feel bound by the resolution it would nevertheless continue to cooperate with the UN and the Secretary-General's good offices.

The Burmese representative maintained that his country had made major political strides and was now in the process of democratization by carrying out the so-called seven-step roadmap.

Four of Burma's Asean partners—Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand—abstained in Wednesday's vote, while Cambodia was not present. Brunei Darussalam, Laos, Malaysia and Vietnam joined China, India and Russia, together with countries ranging from Algeria to Zimbabwe, in voting against the resolution.

Burma's top diplomat at the UN, Kyaw Tint Swe, said in a recent confidential report to his country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that international pressure on Burma would increase within the UN Security Council, particularly from Western members. The envoy said Western influence within the Security Council would increase when Japan and Uganda replace Indonesia and South Africa in January.

Japan voted in favor of the resolution on Wednesday, while Uganda was not present for the vote.

In late November, Burmese junta chief Snr-Gen Than Shwe said in the state-run newspaper *The New Light of Myanmar* that the seven-step roadmap is the only way to smooth the transition toward democratic reform in Burma.

The fifth stage of the seven-step roadmap will be the general election, scheduled for 2010.

According to human rights groups, Burma has more than 2,100 political prisoners. About 215 political activists were sentenced last month to prison terms of up to 68 years.

[UN condemns human rights violations in Myanmar](#)

AP - 25 December, 2008

By EDITH M. LEDERER

UNITED NATIONS — The U.N. General Assembly on Wednesday strongly condemned widespread human rights violations in Myanmar and called on the government to free political prisoners, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

The sharply worded resolution, sponsored by the United States, Israel and many other countries, was approved by a vote of 80-25 with 45 abstentions.

Myanmar accused the assembly of "blatant interference" in its internal political process and said it will not be bound by the resolution. Unlike the more powerful Security Council, General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding but carry weight because they reflect the views of the 192-member world body.

Myanmar's representative, who was not identified, told the assembly the country had made significant political strides and was now on track for a smooth transition to democracy, with a seven-step political process including multiparty elections in 2010.

But the resolution expressed "grave concern" at the failure to include members of pro-democracy leader Suu Kyi's party and other political parties and some ethnic groups "in a genuine process of transition to democracy."

It said Myanmar's political processes "are not transparent, inclusive, free and fair, and that the procedures established for the drafting of the (country's new) constitution resulted in the de facto exclusion of the opposition from the process."

The General Assembly also expressed grave concern at the government's decision to go ahead with a referendum on the constitution "in an atmosphere of intimidation and without regard to international standards of free and fair elections."

It took note of the government's cooperation with the international community in delivering aid to victims of a devastating May cyclone "despite its initial denial of access, which resulted in widespread suffering and increased the risk of loss of life." The cyclone affected 2.4 million people and left an estimated 130,000 people dead or missing.

Myanmar's military, which has ruled since 1962 when the country was known as Burma, tolerates no dissent and crushed pro-democracy protests led by Buddhist monks in September 2007. It holds more than 2,100 political prisoners, up sharply from nearly 1,200 before the demonstrations, human rights groups say.

The General Assembly "strongly" called on Myanmar's government "to desist from further politically motivated arrests" and release political prisoners, including Suu Kyi who has spent more than 13 of the past 19 years under house arrest.

The General Assembly expressed concern over human rights violations, and of Myanmar's "continuing practice of enforced disappearances, use of violence against peaceful demonstrators, rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment."

[More International Pressure in 2009: Burmese Diplomat](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 24, 2008

By WAI MOE Burma's top diplomat at the United Nations says he expects more UN pressure from Western governments for national reconciliation in 2009.

Burma's UN representative, Kyaw Tint Swe, said in a confidential report to Burma's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that there will be pressure on Burma at the UN Security Council, particular from Western countries. Also, he said, the West will have more influence in the Security Council when Japan and Uganda replace Indonesia and South Africa in January.

"Western countries could raise issues related to Burma at the Security Council by discussing and announcing a presidential statement in December," he wrote, "and if the attempt doesn't succeed, they could try again in January." Kyaw Tint Swe wrote his report following a meeting of the "Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar," held in on December 5.

The diplomat said in the report that if Burma cooperates with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's good offices role, countries such as Russia, China, Vietnam, Libya and other developing countries in Africa would probably continue to support Burma.

The diplomat also wrote that UN special envoy to Burma Ibrahim Gambari met with three Burmese diplomats—Kyaw Tint Swe, Than Swe and Tin Maung Naing—to explain the meeting of the "Friend of the Secretary-General on Myanmar."

Gambari told Burmese diplomats that Ban called the meeting because of concerns expressed by some

UN member countries as well as 112 former world leaders and lawmakers from Asian.

The Nigerian diplomat said Ban was disappointed with the lack of progress in achieving national reconciliation in Burma, according to the report.

Gambari reportedly said that Ban told the gathering that he would temporarily suspend his good offices mission, and there were strong objections from Russia, China, India and Singapore.

Along with the United States and France, the United Kingdom also strongly criticized the role of the good offices mission at the meeting, Gambari told Burmese diplomats.

The "Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar" include the US, UK, China, Russia, France, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, the EU, India, Japan, Australia and Norway.

Gambari said that if there was progress in reconciliation in Burma before the new administration in the US, the US government's Burma policy might be modified, according to the report.

The report said Western countries' attempts to put the Burma issue before the UN Security Council were not successful because Russia, China, Vietnam and Indonesia supported the Burmese regime.

Kyaw Tint Swe's accused Western countries of trying to eliminate the UN good offices mission on Burma because of its failure to achieve progress.

Even though there has been criticism and suggestions to replace Gambari, he is still in office with support from Russia and Asian countries, the report said.

Thailand's Burma Policy Set to Change under New Premier

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 25, 2008

By WAI MOE In a recent series of interviews with the international media, the new prime minister of Thailand, Abhisit Vejjajiva, has indicated that the Kingdom's Burma policy is likely to involve a more proactive stance on human rights issues in the military-ruled country.

In an interview with the Qatar-based *Al Jazeera* news network, Abhisit said that he would try to convince fellow members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) of the importance of human rights to the international community.

Unless Asean's efforts to enshrine human rights are credible in the eyes of the international community, "the grouping will not be able to achieve its objectives," he added.

On Burma, Abhisit stressed the need for Asean and the West to find common ground.

"The West and Asean have a common objective. We want to bring good change in Myanmar [Burma]," he said.

Thailand's new foreign minister, Kasit Piromya, has also indicated that the new administration would depart from the business-oriented policies that often determined the direction of the Kingdom's Burma policy under recent governments.

Speaking at an academic conference on December 19, Kasit said that Thailand would now run "an ethical foreign policy," in contrast to that of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his hand-picked successors.

"From now on, there will be no personal business dealings on the side. This government will not mix business and politics," he said. "We shall have no [personal] business deals with the [Burmese] junta; we shall observe human rights and environmental concerns; we shall treat Burmese as we do Thais."

Before Abhisit became prime minister, he was also outspoken about Burma on several occasions. In September 2006, he told *The Leaders*, an online publication, that Asean recognizes that no problem can be considered a purely domestic problem, because any problem that occurs in a member state affects the whole association.

“Thailand and other Asean members should really push for an agenda that shows that we respect human rights and key principles upheld by the international community,” he said.

In another sign of Abhisit’s interest in the views of those calling for a stronger stand on human rights issues, on December 13, two days before he was named prime minister, he met with a number of exiled Burmese politicians at a conference in Bangkok.

It appears that Abhisit is set to follow the example of Thailand’s last Democrat prime minister, Chuan Leekpai, who did not visit military-ruled Burma during his administration from late 1997 to early 2001. Thai prime ministers usually visit Burma as a part of tour of Asean’s 10 member countries soon after taking office.

In 1999, during the Chuan administration, Burmese dissidents in Thailand staged a bold siege of the Burmese embassy in Bangkok, and early the next year seized control of a public hospital in the border province of Ratchaburi.

On the Burmese embassy capture, then Thai Interior Minister Sanan Kachonprasart said that he didn’t regard the attackers as terrorists, but rather as students who were seeking democracy in their homeland.

“They are not terrorists. They are students who fight for democracy,” said Sanan, who is returning to power as a deputy prime minister in Abhisit’s Democrat-led coalition government.

Thailand’s response to the embassy takeover—it defused the crisis by transporting the hostage takers to the border in a government helicopter—angered the Burmese generals, who closed all border checkpoints to Thailand and lifted Thai fishing concessions in Burmese waters without any prior notice.

Chuan’s administration also moved away from Asean’s policy of “constructive engagement” with the Burmese regime, when then Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan proposed in July 1999 that the bloc adopt a more proactive “flexible engagement” policy.

“Flexible engagement was about open and frank discussion about such issues [as human rights], leading to cooperative solutions—a pooling of sovereignty rather than its dilution, so as to make Southeast Asia a secure and prosperous region,” noted Amitav Acharya, an expert on international relations, in July 2007.

The Democrats’ approach to Burmese issues contrasts starkly with that of former Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, of the pro-Thaksin People’s Power Party. Samak visited Burma at least twice during his brief administration, which ended in September when a court decision forced him to step down.

Following a state visit in March, Samak returned to Thailand full of praise for the Burmese generals, describing them as devout Buddhists who practiced meditation and prayed every morning.

In an interview with Thailand’s Chanel 11, he even excused the regime’s brutal treatment of protesters: “Killings and suppression are normal there, but we have to know the facts,” he said.

[Korea Rejects Charge of Rights Abuse in Burma](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 24, 2008

By WILLIAM BOOT BANGKOK — The South Korean government has rejected a complaint that two Korean companies have condoned human rights abuses and failed to meet international standards in Burma in pursuit of gas exploration.

The complaint alleged that industrial conglomerate Daewoo International and government-owned Korea Gas Corporation had failed to comply with guidelines on corporate responsibility and investment laid down by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

South Korea is a member of the OECD, which is made up of the world's leading industrialized countries.

The allegation was lodged by the U.S.-based group EarthRights International (ERI) and backed by several other organizations including South Korea's two biggest labor union federations.

Daewoo and Korea Gas are partners in a consortium developing the huge Shwe gas field off the west coast of Burma close to Bangladesh.

ERI contends that "human rights abuses have been perpetrated against local people opposing Daewoo's Shwe Gas Project."

It also says Daewoo's plan to construct a trans-Burma gas pipeline to China from the Shwe field "poses an unreasonably high risk of more serious and widespread human rights and environmental impacts."

South Korea's Ministry of Knowledge Economy has rejected the complaint "on all counts," ERI said on Wednesday.

"Moreover, the [ministry] opined that the general situation in Burma and specifically around the Shwe Project does not merit an investigation or arbitration between the companies and the complainants," ERI said in a statement. "[It] flies in the face of evidence from groups and communities from within the proposed pipeline area in Burma."

ERI alleged in its October complaint to the South Korean government that Daewoo and Korea Gas—also known as KOGAS—are in breach of at least six OECD guidelines "by failing to respect human rights, contributing to forced labor, failing to promote sustainable development, failing to disclose information about the project, failing to consult with local populations and by failing to conduct an environmental impact assessment according to international standards."

ERI says it was only informed of the complaint rejection indirectly and unofficially via a co-complainant in South Korea.

"If Daewoo and KOGAS were to genuinely conform to the (OECD) guidelines, the Shwe Project would have to be postponed, which evidently is against the priorities of both the companies and the ministry," said Matthew Smith, Burma Project Coordinator at ERI.

"These companies and the Korean government are now on notice that negative social and environmental impacts from this project have begun, and are likely to continue and accelerate if this project moves forward. These companies bear responsibility for these abuses, and the Korean government is failing in its obligations under the OECD guidelines to prevent these harms. The blood of the people of Burma will be on their hands."

ERI and its supporters complained that Daewoo and Korea Gas are in breach of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises.

Daewoo is the main developer in the Shwe consortium with a 51 percent stake. Korea Gas holds 8.5 percent.

The field has recoverable reserves of at least 6 trillion cubic feet of gas, all of which is being purchased by China.

ERI says its research indicates that the 1,100-mile gas pipeline through Burma will pass through at least 24 townships and close by several large population centers in Arakan State and four other regions including Shan State.

[Russia Urges Burma to Cooperate with UN](#)

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 23, 2008

By MIN LWIN Russia's ambassador to Burma has told Burmese Foreign Minister Nyan Win that Moscow will be in a better position to support the Naypyidaw regime if it cooperates with UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari, according to a leaked written account of their meeting.

The secret document, leaked to *The Irrawaddy* by a Burmese Foreign Ministry source, said the Russian ambassador, Mikhail Mgeladze, reassured Nyan Win of Moscow's continuing support, while urging cooperation with the UN. The two met on December 6 at Nyan Win's office in Rangoon.

Gambari has a standing invitation from Burma's ruling junta to visit the country, but he has shown reluctance to return in view of the regime's recent crackdown on the pro-democracy leadership, ignoring appeals from the international community.

Last week, the UN said there was no immediate plan for Gambari to visit Burma in the near future.

"He has no plans immediately to go to Myanmar [Burma]," Michele Montas, spokeswoman for UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, told reporters at the UN headquarters in New York.

Ban himself was earlier scheduled to visit Burma in December, but cancelled his trip after the Burmese military junta went back on its words and intensified its crackdown on pro-democracy activists.

"He [Ban] is not going to go there just for the sake of going. He has to have some indications that his visit will mean something," Montas said.

The Russian ambassador's meeting with Nyan Win was seen as quiet diplomatic pressure on the regime to cooperate with the UN.

Mgeladze restated Moscow's position, however, that the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, the opening of a dialogue between Snr Gen Than Shwe and Suu Kyi and the presence of independent monitors at the 2010 election are only internal matters, the leaked document disclosed.

The Russian ambassador also said that he would not support six-party talks on Burma along the lines of this year's North Korea initiative. A similar Burma initiative has been proposed by some dissidents.

Nyan Win told Mgeladze that the Burmese government would not accept such a proposal. Burma and North Korea were different matters, he said.

Nyan Win told the ambassador that Burma's two major allies, China and India, also opposed the six-party talks proposal.

The meeting between Nyan Win and Mgeladze also dealt with trade relations between Burma and the West. The two officials shared a view that France and Germany are interested in economic cooperation with the regime, although America and the UK take a tougher policy toward Burma.

The Russian ambassador assured Nyan Win that his government intended to strengthen its economic and diplomatic cooperation with the regime.

Burma and Russia celebrated this year the 60th anniversary of their mutual diplomatic relations, which were established with an exchange of notes in February 1948 at the embassy of the Soviet Union in London.

Burma's late dictator Gen Ne Win developed a close relationship with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in the 1960s, sending socialist cadres to the Soviet Union to study socialism. Khrushchev visited Burma in 1960.

About 1500 students, mostly military officers, are currently studying in 11 institutions in Russia. Some 500 Burmese students have so far obtained degrees, including doctorates, in Russia, according to the Russian embassy in Burma.

Burma's army chief and regime No 2, Vice Snr-Gen Maung Aye, visited Russia in April 2006.

Burma has brought a 10 mega watt nuclear reactor and MiG 29 jet fighters from Russia.

Suu Kyi honorary member of 'Council of Women World Leaders'

Mizzima - Monday, 22 December 2008 18:41

by Zarni

Chiang Mai - Honouring the struggle for democracy and human rights, Washington based 'The Council of Women World Leaders' has nominated Burma's detained Nobel Peace Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as honorary member of the group.

The 37 distinguished women members of the council comprising current and former heads of states or heads of government on Saturday voted to nominate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as honorary member of the council as a mark of respect to her commitment to the struggle for democracy in Burma.

"The Council's distinguished membership has voted to include Ms. Suu Kyi as an Honorary Council Member due to her extraordinary leadership in promoting freedom, respect for human rights, and the re-emergence of democracy in her home country of Burma, where she has lived under house arrest since 1995," the council said in a statement.

The council, set up in 1996, is a network that promotes good governance and gender equality, and enhances the experience of democracy globally by increasing the number, effectiveness, and visibility of women who lead their countries.

Fellow Council Member Janet Jagan, former President of Guyana, 1997-1999, in the statement said, "In Guyana, for many years, we have urged the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, and other political prisoners. We are deeply concerned about these prisoners and hope for an early release."

Edith Cresson, a Council Member and former Prime Minister of France, 1991-1992, echoed her feelings saying, "I support the effort of the Council of Women World Leaders for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi."

The 37 council members, which includes current Philippines President Floria Macapagal-Arroyo, is currently chaired by former Ireland President Mary Robinson.

Burma's health care cripplingly under funded: MSF

Mizzima News - Monday, 22 December 2008 22:12

New Delhi - Lack of sufficient funding by the military junta and the international community towards the health care system has caused severe suffering and preventable deaths in Burma, a new report by the New York-based Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières said.

The MSF in its annual 'Top Ten humanitarian crises' said the health care system in the military-ruled country is cripplingly under funded, leaving the vast majority of the people without access to health care.

Luke Arend, Deputy Head of Mission of MSF in Burma in an email message to Mizzima said, due to lack of sufficient funding, "There are simply far too much human suffering and preventable deaths in Myanmar [Burma]."

Arend said both the Burmese government as well as the international community has failed to provide much needed funds to save lives from preventable deaths.

According to him, Burma's military government had allocated only \$0.70 per person in 2008, which is a mere 0.3 % of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and accounts for the world's lowest health care funding.

Similarly, Burma receives very low Overseas Development Aid budget of only US \$3 per person per year.

While the international community has set its commitment on the Millennium Development Goals of 'providing universal access to treatment for HIV to all those who need it by 2010', it is a distant reality in Burma as only less than 20 per cent of people living with HIV receive treatment.

"The Myanmar [Burmese] people do not get this help from the international community like their neighbouring countries do and this is not right," Arend said.

Despite the MSF trying to reach as many needy people as it can, it is faced with financial constraints and shortage of funding and are forced to turn away people in need of medical attention, Arend said.

"The main constraint is coping with the huge unmet medical needs we face day to day and being forced to turn away HIV patients who have nowhere else to go for treatment knowing they will die," Arend said.

According to MSF, Malaria continues to be the number one killer in Burma, while an estimated 242,000 people live with HIV, which killed an estimated 25,000 people last year.

Besides financial constraints, Arend said restriction on aid workers is also another obstacle to reach out to people needing assistance in remote areas.

The MSF, which has operations in Northern Shan, Kachin, Arakan, and Karenni states and Rangoon, Irrawaddy and Tenasserim divisions, said its staff do not have free access around the country.

"Permission is required to visit new locations and unfortunately for the people requiring medical treatment certain places are incredibly difficult or simply not possible to access," Arend said.

Arend said, unless both the Burmese government and the international community shoulders stronger financial commitments, vulnerable Burmese people would continue facing deaths that can be prevented.

Besides Burma, the MSF report said massive forced civilian displacements, violence, and unmet medical needs in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, and Pakistan, along with neglected medical emergencies in Zimbabwe, are some of the worst humanitarian and medical emergencies in the world.

Reporting by Solomon, writing by Mungpi

[Burma One of the Worst Crises in the World: MSF](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 22, 2008

By WAI MOE Military-ruled Burma is hosting one of the world's worst humanitarian and medical emergencies, alongside the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan and Pakistan, according to a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) report on Monday.

But whereas massive forced civilian displacements, violence and unmet medical needs were identified as causes of crises in many nations, MSF singled out Burma and Zimbabwe as having humanitarian emergencies in 2008 due to government neglect.

In its annual list of "Top Ten" humanitarian crises, the Geneva-based organization, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999, stated: "In places such as Myanmar [Burma] and Zimbabwe—where governments fail to make health care a priority or view NGO interventions with suspicion—humanitarian organizations are either limited in the type of assistance they can provide or are left to deal with overwhelming health crises on their own."

MSF added that hundreds of thousands of people in Burma are needlessly dying due to a severe lack of HIV/AIDS treatment as the Burmese government “does far too little to help its own people.”

The organization reported two specific humanitarian disasters in the country which it termed “critical”—the Cyclone Nargis disaster, which killed an estimated 130,000 people, and the HIV/AIDS problem, which was responsible for around 25,000 Burmese lives in 2007 alone.

“Governed by a military regime since 1962 and enduring low-intensity conflict in certain areas, the disaster was the latest blow to a people largely forgotten by the outside world,” MSF stated.

“Sadly the struggle to get an appropriate level of assistance for Myanmar’s most vulnerable people is one that extends throughout the country,” it added.

MSF said an estimated 75,000 people in Burma urgently need antiretroviral therapy to treat HIV/ AIDS, but less than 20 percent of those can get access to it.

[Detained North Koreans to face trial on New Year's Eve](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 22 December 2008 21:07

by Salai Pi Pi

New Delhi – Nineteen North Korean nationals, who were arrested earlier this month, for illegally entering Burma, will undergo trial at the Keng Tung Township Court in Shan state, in Eastern Burma on New Year's Eve, according to a court official.

"We just received their case [19 North Korean nationals], which was transferred from the Tachilek Township's Court," an official from the Keng Tung Township Court told Mizzima.

"They will be produced in court and will face trial on December 31," the official said.

The Burmese police in Tachilek Township in Shan state had arrested the 19 North Koreans earlier this month, when they allegedly entered Burmese territory, while on their way to Thailand from China.

The official at the Keng Tung Court said the North Koreans stayed illegally in eastern Burma from November 19 to December 1, 2008.

Currently, the 19 North Koreans are being detained in Keng Tung prison and have been charged under the Immigration Act 13/1 for illegally entering the country, the official said.

The arrest of the North Korean nationals is the first since North Korea and Burma improved bilateral relations in April 2007, when the deputy foreign ministers of both countries signed a deal in Rangoon.

The following year, 2008, saw a number of high level delegations visit both countries including Burma's Foreign Minister, Nyan Win's historic visit to North Korea in October.

The two countries severed diplomatic ties in 1983, after Burma accused North Korea of a bomb attack targeting the visiting former South Korean President-led delegation. Although the South Korean president survived the attack, 21 people including four of his Cabinet Ministers were killed.

[Myanmar arrests 19 North Korean defectors: police](#)

AFP - Dec 20, 2008

YANGON — Myanmar authorities have arrested 19 defectors from their ally North Korea and plan to charge them with illegally entering the country, a senior police official said Saturday.

The group of mostly men were trying to make their way to South Korea via China and Southeast Asia, an increasingly popular route for North Koreans trying to escape chronic hunger and repression in their communist homeland.

"They were arrested when they entered over the border in eastern Myanmar in early December," said the official, who did not want to be named as he was not authorised to speak to media.

"As they were arrested in our territory, we are taking action against them under the immigration act," he told AFP. "Their main reason (for leaving) was to go to South Korea to meet with their relatives or family members there."

Many North Koreans cross China and travel through Laos and Myanmar to try and reach more sympathetic countries such as Thailand with the hope of winning eventual resettlement in South Korea.

China repatriates North Korean defectors as economic migrants. The Myanmar police official said he was not sure if the 19 people would be returned and said the North Korean embassy in Yangon had not yet intervened.

Military-ruled Myanmar and hardline communist North Korea, which are both severely criticised internationally for human rights abuses, agreed in April 2007 to restore diplomatic relations.

Myanmar severed ties with Pyongyang in 1983 following a failed assassination attempt by North Korean agents on then-South Korean president Chun Doo-Hwan during his visit to the Southeast Asian nation.

The bombing killed 17 of Chun's entourage including cabinet ministers while four Myanmar officials also died.

Myanmar, which has been ruled by generals since 1962, and North Korea have been branded "outposts of tyranny" by the United States, which imposes sanctions on both.

[MYANMAR: More cyclone relief needed - report](#)

19 Dec 2008 10:18:22 GMT

Source: IRIN

Reuters and AlertNet are not responsible for the content of this article or for any external internet sites. The views expressed are the author's alone.

YANGON, 19 December 2008 ([IRIN](#)) - More assistance is needed to help survivors of Cyclone Nargis, despite significant progress on the ground, according to the first of three strategic Post Nargis Periodic Reviews <http://www.aseansec.org/22120.htm> released by the Tripartite Core Group (TCG). Comprising three members each from the Myanmar government, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the UN, the TCG seeks to facilitate cooperation between Myanmar and the international community. "The Periodic Review is an important report that offers extensive information on where we stand in order to meet the needs of the cyclone-affected people," Bishow Parajuli, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, told IRIN in Yangon, the former Burmese capital, on 19 December. The review analysed the status of more than 2,000 households across more than 100 communities in the affected area, including the Ayeyarwady and Yangon divisions.

Health, nutrition, food, water and sanitation, livelihood, shelter and education were covered. Cross-sectoral issues, such as vulnerability and protection, household socio-economic status, receipt of aid, gender and environment were also analysed. The aim of the report is to identify areas for resource allocation and longer-term recovery programming, as well as informing policy-makers.

"It will help decision-makers on where to prioritise relief and recovery efforts seven months after the cyclone hit Myanmar," Anish Roy, special representative of the ASEAN Secretary-General, told IRIN from Jakarta. The review builds on the Village Track Assessment (VTA), one of the methodologies used in the Post Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA), <http://www.asean.org/21765.pdf> released in July, using multiple indicators and covering the delta region at community level. Following the PONJA, viewed by many as the blueprint for the humanitarian response in the area, the review undertakes interim assessments over a 12-month period to document overall progress. Huge challenges remain

According to the TCG, despite significant progress in relief and recovery assistance to date, the relief stage is still not over and more assistance is needed, particularly in nutrition, food, and shelter. "Although assistance is having an impact, more assistance is required, both for immediate relief items and for recovery assistance," said Roy. "There are ongoing chronic problems which likely pre-dated the cyclone, and were now picked up by the assessment." Many people were still living in temporary shelter with plastic sheeting, while others were relying on food assistance, he said. Others need medium-term help to re-establish their livelihoods, such as cash grants, and access to credit at reasonable rates, which would take time to organise, he added. Cyclone Nargis left close to 140,000 people dead or missing when it hit Myanmar's southern Ayeyarwady delta on 2 and 3 May, affecting 2.4 million people and leaving nearly half of them needing assistance. contributor/mw

[Will ASEAN's charter cure Burma's ills?](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 19 December 2008 16:08

by Salai Pi Pi

New Delhi – The ten country bloc known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on Monday of this week announced that its recently drafted charter has come into force.

However, immediately following the news, critics raised several questions as to the credibility of ASEAN and its charter toward easing the political and human rights crises ravaging military ruled Burma.

Nonetheless, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary General of ASEAN, in the association's press release on Monday, expressed his optimism that the charter will strengthen and better formalize roles and relations within the ASEAN community.

"The ASEAN community that is being built will be more rules-based and more people-oriented," Dr. Surin Pitsuwan said.

In November 2007, ASEAN member countries, including Burma, ratified a charter containing commitments to the principles of good governance, the rule of law and the promotion of democracy and human rights.

With these principles in mind, some critics ironically said that the charter, in many respects, has not actually been finalized and accepted, even as ASEAN this week celebrates its ratification.

"There are still huge challenges facing ASEAN, and among them Burma is the greatest," said David Scott Mathieson, a Burma researcher for Human Right Watch.

ASEAN has traditionally adopted a non-interference policy regarding domestic problems of member states, while urging Burma to move towards democracy by holding free and fair elections by 2010 and to release all political prisoners, including Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, ASEAN has often been ridiculed for apparently turning a blind eye to the Burmese regime's failure in complying with the principles now enshrined in the association's charter as well as the ongoing human rights abuses committed by the junta, including the arrest, intimidation and sentencing of political activists for pro-democracy demonstrations, according to Debbie Stothard, coordinator of ALTSEAN-Burma.

"It is clear that the strength of the charter has been seriously undermined by the Burmese regime, yet they (ASEAN) have kept quiet and done nothing," Stothard emphasized.

Stothard further stressed that from the time of adoption of the charter to its coming into force, Burma's generals have done nothing to address the political and human rights shortcomings inside the country, instead pressing people to support this May's referendum on the army backed constitution and arresting numerous political activists.

Last month alone, the Burmese regime handed down lengthy prison terms to over 200 political activists, including party members, students, human rights activists, Buddhist monks, lawyers, artists, journalists and poets. The sentences ranged from four months to up to 68 years incarceration.

Political prisoners were denied access to a fair trial, while some lawyers representing them also found themselves on the wrong side of the junta's laws for their actions and statements during the course of legal proceedings.

Moreover, many sentenced prisoners were subsequently shifted to camps in remote areas of Burma where medical care is poor or non-existent and food is insufficient.

Consequently, activists and critics accuse Burma's military regime of constantly violating and repressing the fundamental rights of the people, and thereby desecrating the spirit of the charter and the trustworthiness of ASEAN as a responsible international player.

"The military regime has reduced the credibility of the charter to toilet paper," Stothard proclaimed.

U Aye Thar Aung, a member of the Committee Representing People's Parliament, also has no expectation on the new charter being an effective tool in abetting to solve Burma's political crisis, as most ASEAN countries themselves are still immature regarding democratic principles and prone to committing human rights abuses.

"The charter is just a letter. If they don't follow the principles they set, it is useless," Aye Thar Aung said.

However, unlike Aye Thar Aung and Stothard, Mathieson maintains a positive view on the existence of an ASEAN charter and said the charter has the potential to become an effective weapon in the progression of rights inside Southeast Asia.

"I don't think we should dismiss the charter at all. If there is a will within government and civil society among ASEAN members, the charter can become something to build on in achieving basic human freedom and progress in member countries," Mathieson said.

Mathieson further called on ASEAN to label Burma as a priority agenda item for next February's summit.

He said, "The association has the obligation to make sure political reform in Burma is inclusive and respectful of international norms of law and order".

Meanwhile, Stothard said that if ASEAN really desires to stress the credibility of its charter, they should push Burma to follow the principles they promised and to either adhere to them or face direct action by the grouping.

"If Burma defies the principles of the charter, they [other ASEAN members] should use their voting power in the UN to demonstrate their objection to the junta's actions," she said.

[EU to give €40.5 million in humanitarian aid to Burma](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 19 December 2008 19:41

by Solomon

New Delhi – The European Commission on Thursday said it will give another €40.5 million (US\$ 58 million) of aid to Burma, particularly targeting victims of Cyclone Nargis, which swept through the country's southwestern coastal region in May.

The announcement, made in Brussels on Thursday, said €22 million of the allotted aid will be provided to cyclone victims while the remaining funds will be given to vulnerable populations inside Burma and to Burmese refugees in Thailand.

Louis Michel, EU Development Commissioner, in a press statement, said, "We have progressively developed very good cooperation with the authorities [Burma's ruling junta] on humanitarian access in the Irrawaddy Delta in the wake of the Cyclone Nargis."

The new funds will be distributed through non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies and the Red Cross and will reach an estimated population of at least two million people.

"The Commission will continue advocating for similar cooperation and access to other parts of the

country," said Michel, iterating that the aid package is aimed at more than just the country's storm ravished delta region.

The EU also said it aims to raise funds to help vulnerable sections of the Burmese population, especially the hundreds and thousands of Muslim Rohingya in Arakan state in western Burma who are facing severe oppression by the military junta, including forced relocation, forced labor and denial of citizenship.

"I am particularly concerned about the forgotten crisis in northern Rakhine (Arakan) State, where some 800,000 Muslim Rohingya live in terrible conditions," said Michel.

The EU had earlier provided €17 million in funds for cyclone relief efforts related to shelter, food, water, sanitation, health, nutrition, protection and logistics. With the new funds, EU support for cyclone relief will total some €39 million.

More than seven months after Cyclone Nargis struck the country, victims still continue to lack adequate support according to the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), which performs periodic reviews and constitutes representatives from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Burmese government and United Nations.

"The relief stage has not finished and more assistance is still needed, especially in the nutrition, food and shelter sectors," the TCG said in a press statement on Friday.

In its inaugural "Periodic Review" the TCG said that during its fact finding assessment conducted between 29 October to 19 November 2008, it found that 2,376 households in 108 communities in Irrawaddy and Rangoon Divisions are still struggling with temporary shelter and food and water shortages while confronting health obstacles such as fever and diarrhea.

"There was a need for increased support to livelihood recovery, in order for people to regain the level of self-sufficiency that they had prior to Cyclone Nargis," said the TCG.

Despite a United Nations appeal in the immediate months following the deadly storm for US\$ 483 million to help survivors, thus far only 64 percent of the figure, or US\$ 304 million, has been pledged.

Cyclone Nargis struck the country on May 2nd and 3rd of this year and affected more than 2.4 million people, leaving at least 130,000 people dead or missing.

A villager working in the salt business near the remote village of Wakone in Laputta Township, one of the hardest hit cyclone areas, said aid shipments to the beleaguered community have slowly petered out.

"Aid supplies are no more arriving to our place, the last one came about ten days ago," said the businessman, adding that the aid previously received was about five kilograms of rice per person.

He said it has also become extremely difficult for people to carry on business as workers demand more money – nearly three times the normal price. The situation, he claims, is due to the cyclone killing so many workers and people now experiencing a psychosis of fear in relation to working near the shore.

"We really need more money to be successfully running the business again, otherwise we cannot pay the employees," he said.

He added that before the cyclone workers were paid about 20,000 kyat (US\$ 19) in advance, but now demand between four and five times that amount.

He went on to say that though the government has provided loans of 300,000 kyat per acre, businessmen are concerned they might not be able to pay the amount back in three years time, the deadline the government has fixed for reimbursement.

He also said that while a few aid agencies are still providing aid to villages with relatively large populations, small and remote villages no longer see any assistance, if in fact they ever did.

"Here people are living in small, temporary houses and it is very difficult to stay under the sun because it is too hot. We are in need of housing materials and continued food supplies," lamented one local villager.

Burma likely to announce 'Election Law' on Independence Day

Mizzima - Friday, 19 December 2008 20:35

by Mungpi

New Delhi - As a step forward along the roadmap to democracy, Burma's military junta will soon announce an Election Law that will set guidelines and criteria for the formation of political parties to contest the upcoming 2010 general election, sources said.

According to Larry Jagan, a journalist based in Bangkok and a Burma affairs expert, the junta is likely to announce the Election Law in early January 2009 and most likely on Burma's Independence Day of January 4th.

Burma's military government had previously announced early this year that it would hold a general election in 2010 to elect representatives to a new government which is to include some civilian representatives.

In preparation for the election, sources close to the military said the junta has already prepared a set of rules and regulations for the formation of political parties, the document now pending to be made public as the country's paramount military figure, Senior General Than Shwe, is yet to have given his final approval.

"According to what I know [from my sources] the election law will be announced on January 4th," Jagan, a veteran journalist who has covered Burma for years, told Mizzima.

A source, who wished to remain unnamed, said the junta is likely to make public the Law in late December or early January, but in any scenario it is clear that the junta will only make such an announcement when it is confident they have done all the necessary groundwork to secure electoral victory.

Analysts, including Jagan, believe that the junta, making use of an Election Law, will ensure that it gets an upper hand in the upcoming election and will tie up any possible opposition at the polling booths, including that led of detained Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's party – National League for Democracy (NLD).

"It is likely that the NLD will be allowed to partake, if they are willing to contest by the established rules, but that does not mean there would be a free and fair process," said Jagan, adding that the junta will make sure the party is left handicapped.

The NLD, on its part, has so far not reached any decision on whether or not to contest the upcoming election.

"We will decide on it, but as of now we still think it is too early," Nyan Win, the NLD's spokesperson in Rangoon, told Mizzima. He said the NLD would love to see progress in the electoral process, including the announcement of the Election Law, so that an accurate assessment of the NLD's potential involvement could be formulated.

However, according to some, regardless of specifics it would be unwise for the NLD to remain out of the fold, encouraging the party to contest the poll.

Aye Lwin, leader of the 88 generation students (Union of Myanmar), a group backed by the junta, during an interview with Mizzima said it would be wiser for the NLD and other opposition elements to join the election process and accept a new government as a step forward to democratization.

"Democracy cannot be achieved overnight, so we have to build it slowly from the given the space," Aye Lwin said.

Aye Lwin admits that he and his group are now campaigning and intend to form a political party to contest the election, saying he believes that the election will be free and fair and that the result will bring Burma a step closer to democracy.

But unlike Aye Lwin, Jagan said the junta's priority is not to allow a repetition of the 1990 election, in which detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi led the NLD to a landslide victory.

"The NLD might be allowed to run in the election but it does not necessarily mean it is free and fair. It is more likely that they would be harassed and hindered, and the junta would likely arrest those they thought were problems," Jagan elaborated.

[EU provides extra 40 million euros in aid to Myanmar](#)

AFP – 18 December 2008

BRUSSELS — The European Commission on Thursday decided give an extra 40.5 million euros (58.7 million dollars) in aid for two million vulnerable people in Myanmar, notably those affected by cyclone Nargis in May.

A total of 22 million euros is allocated to help cyclone-hit communities in and around the southwest Irrawaddy delta, where the catastrophe left 138,000 people dead or missing and devastated rice paddies, a commission statement said.

The money is added to the 17 million euros which was released as emergency aid after the cyclone struck.

A second aid envelope of 18.5 million euros will be provided for a programme targeting "other highly vulnerable populations inside Myanmar, as well Burmese refugees in Thailand".

Around two million people are expected to benefit directly from this support which will be managed by the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) and channelled through European NGOs, United Nations agencies and the Red Cross.

"We have progressively developed a very good cooperation with the authorities on humanitarian access in the Irrawaddy Delta in the wake of the cyclone Nargis," said EU Development Commissioner Louis Michel.

The EU's executive will continue advocating for similar cooperation and access to other parts of the country, he added.

"I am particularly concerned about the forgotten crisis in Northern Rakhine State, where some 800,000 Muslim Rohingya live in terrible conditions."

[Myanmar blames "extravagant" Americans for crisis](#)

Reuters - Thu Dec 18, 2008 9:43am GMT

YANGON - Military-ruled Myanmar, one of the most isolated countries in the world, has largely escaped the global financial upheaval triggered by "extravagant" Americans, state media said on Thursday.

The former Burma relied on few imports and its main trading partners, India and China, were suffering less than others in the current economic downturn, a commentary in several state-owned newspapers said.

"I dare say that our country does not need to worry about the global financial crisis," the article said.

Newspapers are tightly controlled by the military, which has reduced a once-promising economy and country to an impoverished international pariah after more than four decades of rule.

Noting that the financial crisis had been spawned in the United States, the article said: "Americans are a people who are extravagant and do not hesitate to buy an elephant if it is available on credit."

Some independent observers were less optimistic about Myanmar's ability to sail through the crisis.

Despite abundant natural gas, minerals and timber coveted by China, India and other regional neighbours, Myanmar is among the world's poorest countries due mainly to the failed policies of a reclusive regime.

"Our economy is already in very bad shape. So it couldn't be worse," said a retired professor, noting that the main city, Yangon, experienced 20-hour blackouts each day.

Returning migrant workers had little hope of finding work after losing their jobs in neighbouring countries such as Thailand, where factories are closing or cutting production due to the global economic slowdown.

A member of the Federation of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry said export industries were already feeling the pain of slowing demand.

"There has been a steep drop in orders for some major export items such as garments and rubber," the businessman said.

The global economic downturn is a further blow to a tourism industry struggling to recover in the aftermath of cyclone Nargis in May, and the junta's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protests in 2007.

In the ancient capital of Bagan, home to 1,000 year-old temples on the banks of the Irrawaddy River, the lack of tourists in the traditional peak season is threatening many with ruin.

"The lacquerware industry depends on tourists, but it is now facing a critical condition," one hotel operator said, adding that many artists were abandoning the centuries-old industry.

(Reporting by Aung Hla Tun; Writing by Alan Raybould; Editing by Darren Schuettler and Dean Yates)

[Czech Republic, East Timor offer asylum to Burmese rebels](#)

Mizzima - Thursday, 18 December 2008 19:53

by Mungpi

New Delhi - East Timor and the Czech Republic have 'in principle' agreed to offer asylum to 34 Burmese ethnic rebels, who are currently lodged in Kolkata's presidency jail in India and facing trial for alleged gun-running.

Soe Myint, Editor-in-Chief of Burmese Independent News Agency – Mizzima – who is appointed by the Calcutta court as interpreter for the rebels said, the two countries have agreed to offer asylum in order to avoid deportation to military-ruled Burma, if they were found not guilty under the Indian law.

"Now that the trial is almost over, and if they are found not guilty, they cannot remain in India... But repatriating them to Burma could be dangerous for them so these two countries have offered to provide shelter to avoid repatriation," Soe Myint said.

But he added that in order to resettle the rebels to these countries, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) needs to intervene and recognise them as refugees.

With the case of the Burmese ethnic rebels - Arakanese and Karen - drawing to an end, 38 Burmese organisations including the National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA) and the Karen National Union (KNU), of which organisation the detained rebels belong to, have written an appeal to the UN High Commissioner for Refugee in Geneva to intervene into the case.

The 38 organisations include armed resistant groups, political groups and parties that have been living in exile and struggling to restore democracy in Burma.

In their letter to Mr. Antonio Guterres, the High Commissioner for refugees, the groups said, the 34 rebels, even if acquitted of the current charges, if denied UNHCR protection and promised resettlement to third country, could continued to be detained for charges under the foreigners act.

The groups said the worst would be for India to deport them back to Burma, as they would be executed or jailed by the military-rulers, whom the rebels have fought for years.

Akshay Sharma, one of the defence counsels of the rebels, said the prosecution has so far failed to provide sufficient evidence to prove the charge. But with at least three to four court schedules still pending, the trial could continue for another six months.

"Within this period the court will make a judgement," Sharma told Mizzima during an interview earlier.

"We have all the positive prospects," Sharma said.

However, the last court session, scheduled in late November was adjourned to January 15 to 21, 2009 by the court saying the prosecution was unable to bring some of the resources.

The 34 rebels, belonging to armed rebel groups the NUPA and KNU, were arrested in February 1998 by Indian armed forces after they had come to India's eastern archipelago of Andamans.

The rebels, who would be completing 11 years of detention in February 2009, said they had been framed by the Indian military.

They said, they have been associated for long with Indian military intelligence, and have been used to watch Chinese naval activity and movement of northeast Indian rebels on the Arakan coast in western Burma, until India's relations with the Burmese military junta improved in the late 1990s.

According to the rebels, the Indian military intelligence had made an offer to them to come and set up base in the Landfall islands of the Andamans. But when they came in two ships, six of their leaders were killed in cold blood and the rest were arrested and put in jail.

They were arrested and kept in Port Blair without being charged until October 2006, when they were ordered by the Supreme Court to be moved to Kolkata, after a leading human rights lawyer Nandita and her associates filed a petition and to conduct a day-to-day trial.

With defence counsels confident that the charges will be dropped as the prosecution failed to present adequate witnesses and evidence, Soe Myint said, they need a place where they can have asylum, because if they are not convicted under Indian law, and are not resettled to a third country, Delhi might deport them back to Burma.

"If they [the rebels] are sent back to Burma, they might even be executed," Soe Myint added.

[30 Myanmar refugees accepted](#)

Straits Times / AFP - Dec 18, 2008

TOKYO - JAPAN has decided to accept about 30 Myanmar refugees who are living in camps in Thailand, officials said on Thursday, marking a new stage in Tokyo's acceptance of refugees.

While small by global standards, the number is significant for Japan, which only accepts dozens of refugees each year and imposes tight restrictions on immigration.

Around 120,000 Myanmar refugees live in nine camps along the border with Thailand, most of who have fled crackdowns by Myanmar's junta on ethnic armies.

A United Nations-led resettlement plan launched in 2005 has offered more than 38,000 Myanmar refugees an opportunity to start new lives overseas, mostly in the United States.

Japan said it was ready to take part in the plan, as Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso met in Tokyo with Antonio Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

'As Thailand bans the Myanmar refugees from going outside their camps, it is hoped that the international community can accept them and allow them to lead normal lives,' Cabinet Office official Junko Yamaji said.

It will mark the first time that Japan accepts refugees already living in another country, she said.

'The difference between the conventional acceptance of refugees and the resettlement is that the refugees don't have to come to Japan to apply for refugee status,' she added.

Japan plans to start the project in the 2010 fiscal year but has yet to decide where the refugees will live or how to support them.

Japan has been a major donor to the UN refugee agency but has also come under fire for not extending more of a welcome mat. --

[Burma cancels license of 84 tour companies](#)

Mizzima - Thursday, 18 December 2008 22:07

by Zarni

Chiang Mai - Eighty four tour and travel companies have been stripped off of their license by Burma's directorate of Hotels and Tourism for failing to renew their license, officials said.

An official from the office the directorate of Hotels and Tourism told Mizzima that the license of the tour companies, which have been operating for two years, were cancelled as they failed to renew their license.

"Those that have been stripped off their license do not include popular tour companies. These companies are the ones that failed to report for more than two years, and defaulted in paying taxes," the official at the directorate office of Hotels and tourism in Naypyitaw, Burma's new capital, said.

The 84 tour companies are smaller operators among the over 500 tour companies operating in Burma.

"We issue a license for two years, and tour companies are required to renew them after two years. We can still accept it with a late fine for about six months. But these companies have disappeared for years. For some we don't even know the addresses anymore," the official added.

Sources in the tour industry said, the companies include a firm with foreign investments, and 20 companies that collaborate with foreign investors, while the rest are owned by local Burmese tour operators.

Tour companies in Burma have experienced a boom since mid-1990s, with the country receiving large numbers of foreign tourists. The lucrative business attracted private tour operators who rushed to apply for licenses and have effectively conducted tour operations.

However, the tourism industry suffered a jolt following the September 2007 monk-led protests, and smaller companies faced difficult times. Besides, more and more tourists avoided visiting Burma, when in May the ruling junta responded poorly to a natural disaster - Cyclone Nargis - that swept through Burma's coastal divisions of Rangoon and Irrawaddy.

Following the devastation by the cyclone, the junta's referendum on a draft constitution in May 2008, and the September 2007 mass protests, several private tour companies and smaller agencies folded up as the tourism business slid into doldrums.

An official of a Rangoon based Tour Company said, "Most of the tour companies that were stripped of their license are smaller companies that had rushed in when tourism boomed. It does not include those that are still actively doing business."

"For those continuing in business, even if tourism is not doing as well as earlier, they are still able to survive and have not come to a point where they have to shut down operations," the official added.

[Will ASEAN's charter cure Burma's ills?](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 19 December 2008 16:08

by Salai Pi Pi

New Delhi – The ten country bloc known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on Monday of this week announced that its recently drafted charter has come into force.

However, immediately following the news, critics raised several questions as to the credibility of ASEAN and its charter toward easing the political and human rights crises ravaging military ruled Burma.

Nonetheless, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary General of ASEAN, in the association's press release on Monday, expressed his optimism that the charter will strengthen and better formalize roles and relations within the ASEAN community.

"The ASEAN community that is being built will be more rules-based and more people-oriented," Dr. Surin Pitsuwan said.

In November 2007, ASEAN member countries, including Burma, ratified a charter containing commitments to the principles of good governance, the rule of law and the promotion of democracy and human rights.

With these principles in mind, some critics ironically said that the charter, in many respects, has not actually been finalized and accepted, even as ASEAN this week celebrates its ratification.

"There are still huge challenges facing ASEAN, and among them Burma is the greatest," said David Scott Mathieson, a Burma researcher for Human Right Watch.

ASEAN has traditionally adopted a non-interference policy regarding domestic problems of member states, while urging Burma to move towards democracy by holding free and fair elections by 2010 and to release all political prisoners, including Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, ASEAN has often been ridiculed for apparently turning a blind eye to the Burmese regime's failure in complying with the principles now enshrined in the association's charter as well as the ongoing human rights abuses committed by the junta, including the arrest, intimidation and sentencing of political activists for pro-democracy demonstrations, according to Debbie Stothard, coordinator of ALTSEAN-Burma.

"It is clear that the strength of the charter has been seriously undermined by the Burmese regime, yet they (ASEAN) have kept quiet and done nothing," Stothard emphasized.

Stothard further stressed that from the time of adoption of the charter to its coming into force, Burma's generals have done nothing to address the political and human rights shortcomings inside the country, instead pressing people to support this May's referendum on the army backed constitution and arresting numerous political activists.

Last month alone, the Burmese regime handed down lengthy prison terms to over 200 political activists, including party members, students, human rights activists, Buddhist monks, lawyers, artists, journalists and poets. The sentences ranged from four months to up to 68 years incarceration.

Political prisoners were denied access to a fair trial, while some lawyers representing them also found themselves on the wrong side of the junta's laws for their actions and statements during the course of legal proceedings.

Moreover, many sentenced prisoners were subsequently shifted to camps in remote areas of Burma where medical care is poor or non-existent and food is insufficient.

Consequently, activists and critics accuse Burma's military regime of constantly violating and repressing the fundamental rights of the people, and thereby desecrating the spirit of the charter and the trustworthiness of ASEAN as a responsible international player.

"The military regime has reduced the credibility of the charter to toilet paper," Stothard proclaimed.

U Aye Thar Aung, a member of the Committee Representing People's Parliament, also has no expectation on the new charter being an effective tool in abetting to solve Burma's political crisis, as most ASEAN countries themselves are still immature regarding democratic principles and prone to committing human rights abuses.

"The charter is just a letter. If they don't follow the principles they set, it is useless," Aye Thar Aung said.

However, unlike Aye Thar Aung and Stothard, Mathieson maintains a positive view on the existence of an ASEAN charter and said the charter has the potential to become an effective weapon in the progression of rights inside Southeast Asia.

"I don't think we should dismiss the charter at all. If there is a will within government and civil society among ASEAN members, the charter can become something to build on in achieving basic human freedom and progress in member countries," Mathieson said.

Mathieson further called on ASEAN to label Burma as a priority agenda item for next February's summit.

He said, "The association has the obligation to make sure political reform in Burma is inclusive and respectful of international norms of law and order".

Meanwhile, Stothard said that if ASEAN really desires to stress the credibility of its charter, they should push Burma to follow the principles they promised and to either adhere to them or face direct action by the grouping.

"If Burma defies the principles of the charter, they [other ASEAN members] should use their voting power in the UN to demonstrate their objection to the junta's actions," she said.

[UN chief criticizes Myanmar and Zimbabwe](#)

AP- 17 December 2008

By EDITH M. LEDERER

UNITED NATIONS — Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon criticized the governments of Myanmar and Zimbabwe Wednesday and said a year of multiple crises has put human rights on trial.

At a year-end news conference, the U.N. chief said 2009 "promises to be no less difficult" than 2008, with a worsening humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, the danger of anarchy in Somalia, a continuing global financial crisis and the need to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Ban said he has been frustrated by the failure to protect innocent lives, and the lack of resources and political will to tackle important issues such as poverty, conflicts and climate change.

Though the world came together to confront the global financial crisis, "I fear we are only at the end of the beginning," Ban said, stressing that "global solidarity" will be key to a solution.

Ban said he was pleased at the world's response to natural disasters, including the devastating cyclone in Myanmar and hurricanes that lashed Haiti.

"Yet I am disappointed by the unwillingness of the government of Myanmar to deliver on its promises for democratic dialogue and the release of political prisoners," he said.

In Zimbabwe, Ban said, "the humanitarian situation grows more alarming every day" and the country "stands on the brink of economic, social and political collapse."

The secretary-general said he told President Robert Mugabe "things need to change urgently" during a meeting several weeks ago on the sidelines of a U.N. conference in Doha, Qatar, and Mugabe agreed to receive his envoy, Haile Menkarios.

"Now we are told that the timing is not right," Ban said. "If this is not the time, when is?"

The Southern African Development Community has insisted on leading diplomatic efforts to address the crisis, but eight months of talks have produced few results, Ban said, adding that "a fair and sustainable political solution" must come quickly.

In Congo, Ban said, U.N. forces "have held the line" but have been unable to protect innocent people from violence.

"Our record on human rights is on trial — in many places, in many ways," he said. "In this 60th anniversary year, we must stand strong for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

In conflict-wracked Darfur, he urged Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir to fully cooperate with U.N. resolutions and lamented that the joint U.N.-African Union peacekeeping force still needs helicopters and will only be 60 percent deployed by the end of the year.

In Afghanistan, he said "a political surge and a clear change of direction are required" to deal with growing insurgent attacks and the worsening humanitarian situation.

While the U.N. responded well to the world food crisis, tackling the problem on a wide front including nutrition, agricultural production, trade and social protection, "it has not gone away" he said.

Ban said he was pleased with U.N. and international efforts to keep climate change high on the global agenda.

"2009 will be the year of climate change," he said, stressing the importance of reaching a global deal requiring nations to make mandatory cuts in greenhouse gases starting in 2013.

[Burmese migrants deported from Malaysia after protest](#)

DVB - Dec 18, 2008

Around 40 Burmese migrant workers in Malaysia were deported to Burma yesterday morning after a protest, causing uncertainty among Burmese migrant communities in the country.

A Burmese employee at an electronic company in Johor state said the workers were deported because they had protested against tightening regulations on migrant workers.

The employee said the workers had sought help from the Burmese embassy in Malaysia but officials there had given them no support.

Some of those who were involved in the protests, mainly Nepalese nationals, were allowed to return to work.

Reporting by Aye Nai

[Regime Shrugs Off Effects on Burma of Global Economic Crisis](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

In an article downplaying the effects of the global economic crisis on Burma, the regime's mouthpiece, *The New Light of Myanmar*, claims the country will fare better than "extravagant" Americans and unnamed other nations.

Under the headline "*We remain unperturbed*," Kyaw Ye Min—apparently the pseudonym of a regime sympathizer—wrote: "In this age of globalization, it hardly need be said that our country will also be more or less affected by the global crisis. However, we would like to say its effects will not be as bad for our country as others."

Among those other countries, Kyaw Ye Min names the US. Americans, he says, “are a people who are extravagant and do not hesitate to buy an elephant if it is available on credit.”

Kyaw Ye Min’s unrealistic assessment of the situation echoes a recent statement by Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein, who went even further and said Burma would not be affected at all by the global financial meltdown.

Burma’s business community has good reason to question the optimism of Thein Sein and Kyaw Ye Min.

The financial crisis that began in the United States and rapidly evolved into a once-in-a-generation global economic downturn has by no means spared Burma, a country whose military leaders have long prided themselves on their ability to keep outside influences at bay.

The global slowdown is having a knock-on effect on Burmese business, where a credit crunch has been created by the reluctance of commodity exporters to lend to producers. The banking system is on the verge of collapse.

The value of the country’s exports goods is falling, with several businessmen reporting that exports have been at a standstill for several months.

The only way now for Burma is down—but the country is already at the bottom, unable to fall any further.

Despite all the evidence, the ruling junta remains in denial, unwilling to recognize the seriousness of Burma’s plight.

The Irrawaddy, which has been consistently following the crisis, reported that hundreds of Burmese workers have lost their jobs in Malaysia and Thailand and have been forced to return to Burma—a country still struggling to recover from the Cyclone Nargis disaster.

In a cynical and probably totally impractical policy statement, Prime Minister Thein Sein said the returning workers could be employed in the cyclone-devastated rice paddies of the Irrawaddy delta.

Sean Turnell, professor of economics at Australia’s Macquarie University and an expert on the Burmese economy, told *The Irrawaddy* recently that the cyclone damage in the delta was still impeding a return to anything like normal rice production there.

Turnell spoke of “massive loss of farm animals, dykes destroyed, fields in some of the most productive areas inundated for a while with seawater, death and labor shortages, and a government that turns grant-in-aid into loans.”

Even Prime Minister Thein Sein admitted the scale of the disaster, saying recently: “Although Myanmar’s [Burma’s] rice production has increased, it can be found that she has not been capable of producing more rice than the nations that are smaller and have [less] farmland than Myanmar...Myanmar is to strive for ensuring local self-sufficiency in rice and [exports of] about 3 million tons of rice annually.”

Burma’s moribund economy needs more than workers in the rice fields of the Irrawaddy delta and incapable government ministers in Naypyidaw. Skilled economists unafraid to admit and confront the seriousness of the situation are also urgently required.

[How the Regime Punishes Political Prisoners’ Families](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

By SAW YAN NAING

The wife of imprisoned activist Pyone Cho spent about 90,000 kyat (US \$75) on a 10-day journey to visit him in jail in Kawthaung, southern Burma. The sister of another political prisoner, the prominent labor rights activist Su Su Nway, spent only slightly less on a six-day journey to visit her in Kale Prison in Sagaing Division, central Burma.

Family members spoke to *The Irrawaddy* about the huge difficulties they faced as a result of the regime’s decision to consign activists condemned in the recent series of trials to prisons in various remote parts of Burma.

The decision is being described by human rights organizations as a form of torture, imposed not only on the abused prisoners themselves but also on their families.

More than 100 of the estimated 215 activists sentenced in the November trials to terms of imprisonment of up to 68 years have been consigned to at least 20 isolated prisons in various parts of Burma, according to the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), known as the AAPP.

AAPP Joint-Secretary Bo Kyi said it was international practice elsewhere in the world to confine condemned people in prisons close to where family members lived. "Here [Burma] they were moved to prisons far from their relatives."

Bo Kyi accused the regime of intentionally creating problems for prisoners and their families, causing mental and physical pain.

Many of the political prisoners were being held under inhumane conditions and were being tortured, Bo Kyi said. Some prisons had no doctors or facilities for treating inmates.

"Some political prisoners are not allowed to walk outside their compounds," Bo Kyi said. "They even can't see the sun. It is very dangerous for the health of those detained in cold locations over the next few months."

Several political prisoners, including Zarganar, Burma's best-known comedian, are in Myitkyina Prison, Kachin State, where temperatures drop below zero in winter.

One Rangoon source said a youth member of the opposition National League for Democracy, Aung Kyaw Oo, serving a 19-year sentence in Pegu Prison, had been savagely beaten and denied medical treatment.

When Aung Kyaw Oo's wife visited the prison on December 3 she was denied permission to see him and had to wait until December 13. A prison source said Aung Kyaw Oo had told his wife about the beatings.

A defense lawyer, Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min, who recently fled to Thailand, said one of his clients, Myint Aye, founder of the group called Human Rights Defenders and Promoters, had also been tortured while in prison.

"Prison authorities questioned him continuously for five days. They didn't let him sit down and sleep. He finally collapsed."

Myint Aye was convicted of involvement in a bomb attack on an office run by the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association in Rangoon's Shwepyithar Township on July 1.

The New York-based international rights group Human Rights Watch has also deplored the regime's decision to send political detainees to remote prisons.

In a statement issued on Tuesday, Elaine Pearson, the group's deputy Asia director, accused the regime of using the country's legal mechanisms to threaten political prisoners and deny them access to justice.

The statement also urged Asean Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan to assign an independent legal assessment team to closely watch the treatment of political prisoners in Burmese courts and in Burmese prisons.

It said Asean should address Burma's lack of respect for the rule of law when it holds its rescheduled summit meeting in early 2009.

Pearson said: "The government locks up peaceful activists, sends them to remote prisons, and then intimidates or imprisons the lawyers who try to represent them. This abuse of the legal system shows the sorry state of the rule of law in Burma."

[Reading letter sent to Than Shwe fetches prison term](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 17 December 2008 22:07

by The The

New Delhi – A person was sentenced to six months in prison for just reading a letter sent to the junta supremo to his younger brother who is being held in Insein prison for joining the saffron revolution during his prison interview and visit.

The letter requested Snr. Gen. Than Shwe for granting permission for medical treatment to the political prisoners. The letter was sent to ICRC, UNHCR and NLD including Snr. Gen. Than Shwe on January 14.

During a prison visit to his brother on January 22, Ko Thant Zin Oo read out this letter to his younger brother Hlaing Thar Yar Township NLD member Thant Zin Myo who was serving a 19 year sentence.

He was arrested on 31 January and charged under section 42 of Burma's Jail Manual (BJM), bringing unauthorized documents into the prison.

"On that 22nd the jailor himself came and looked into this problem and took no action against him. But he was arrested on 31st and released on bail. We learnt the he was charged with section 42 of BJM," he said.

The letter was brought into the prison after being checked thoroughly many times by the jail authorities before he entered for the prison interview.

One of the four prosecution witnesses admitted in court that they permitted him to bring this letter into the prison.

The opposition political community said that Insein Court additional judge Daw Baby read out the directive given to them by Home Ministry mistakenly on the bench on March 28. This directive instructed the judges to give severe and deterrent punishment to the accused in this case, opposition political circles said.

Ko Thant Zin Oo is currently being held in Insein prison.

[Myanmar, Thailand to raise momentum of cooperation next year](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-17 16:47

YANGON -- Myanmar and Thailand will continue to work for raising the momentum of mutually-beneficial economic cooperation between the two countries next year, the local weekly journal Yangon Times quoted Myanmar's biggest business organization as reporting Wednesday.

It was pledged at a recent meeting of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the Thai Embassy.

These cooperation covers holding of Thai international trade fair in Myanmar and enhancement of reciprocal trade next February, the report said.

Myanmar-Thailand bilateral cooperative ties have maintained a good momentum in recent years with Thailand playing a key role in Myanmar's economic development as Thailand has become Myanmar's biggest foreign investor and trading partner.

With huge investment of \$6.311 billion pouring in Myanmar's electric power sector alone, Thailand's investment has accounted for \$7.3 billion or over 53 percent of Myanmar's total foreign investment received.

The Thai investment prompted Myanmar's contracted foreign investment to hit \$14.736 billion in 19 years as of the end of 2007 since the country opened to such investment in late 1988.

Thailand also stood as Myanmar's top trading partner as well as top exporting country during the fiscal year 2007-08, which ended in March, with a bilateral trade volume of \$3.205 billion of which Myanmar's export to Thailand amounted to \$2.823 billion, while its import from Thailand \$382 million, according to Myanmar official statistics.

Myanmar gained a trade surplus with Thailand for exporting natural gas during the year.

Desperate Decisions

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

By KYI WAI

RANGOON — In a dark room in a dormitory for workers at a steel factory, a 58-year-old woman is fanning her daughter, who is moaning in agony and covered in sweat.

"It hurts, it hurts," the young woman groans. "Mother, it hurts."

The woman's voice and the sound of her mother's fan fill the room. As she watches her daughter suffer, the older woman's despair deepens. Seeing no way to end her child's excruciating pain, she moves the fan faster, knowing that it is all she can do to help.

Normally, it would be possible to turn to others for assistance. But this was no normal medical emergency. If she asked for help, the mother knew that she would have to explain what was wrong with her daughter, and that would mean revealing her crime: having an abortion.

Abortion is a crime in Burma, but when the young woman became pregnant with her third child, she knew that she had no other choice. Three months into the pregnancy, she went to a back-alley abortionist.

The mother knew about her daughter's decision, and did not object.

"My daughter already has two children, and she also has a lot of debt. I know it's a crime, but I had to agree when she told me what she wanted to do," the mother said.

"It's all my fault," she added, breaking into sobs.

The woman's daughter and son-in-law were low-paid employees of the steel factory who struggled to make ends meet. Two days after the abortion, the daughter went to a hospital for women and was diagnosed with blood poisoning. No longer able to work, she was threatened with dismissal from her job. On top of that, she faced three years in prison if anybody learned the cause of her condition.

The woman's plight was not uncommon.

"Most women in Burma are poor and have little knowledge about birth control. When they have an unplanned pregnancy, they worry about their future and try to induce an abortion. Many of them end up with blood poisoning because of this," said a gynecologist in Rangoon.

"There are more and more abortion patients every year," the doctor added. "Seven out of 10 patients who come to this clinic want abortions. The number has tripled since 2004, and is eight times higher than it was a decade ago."

Most of the women seeking abortions are poor and already have more children than they can support. Although Buddhism proscribes the practice, and the law treats it as a major crime, many feel it is the only way they can deal with an unwanted pregnancy.

Poor women who want to end a pregnancy usually turn to abortionists who use traditional methods. These include administering tonics known as *saypugyi* ("hot medicines"), which consist of common herbal medications mixed with alcohol, boiled ginger water or hot water and black pepper. If these fail to have the desired effect, more invasive means are applied.

"Local abortionists usually try to damage the embryo in the uterus by putting strong pressure on the supra-pubic region or pounding on the abdomen. They also insert sticks into the uterus," said a doctor.

These methods carry a high risk that pieces of the embryo will remain in the uterus, resulting in bleeding and infection. In extreme cases, blood poisoning or hemorrhaging can lead to death.

Despite such risks, however, many women see no alternative.

"For rich families, children are treasures," said the gynecologist. "But for the poor, they are often a burden they can afford to bear."

"I have a son and this is my second pregnancy," said a woman lying in a bed and fighting against her pain. "If I have this child, I will be fired from my job. So I had to have an abortion."

The woman recalled being told by her boss on her first day of work at a water-purifying plant that he wouldn't let her stay on the job if she became pregnant. "He knew I was married, so he told me not to expect any time off if I was planning to have another child."

Such warnings are common in Burma, where employers are obliged by law to give married women 45 days of paid maternity leave when they become pregnant—something that almost never happens in practice.

Poverty doesn't only force many women to resort to abortions—it also increases the likelihood a woman will become pregnant in the first place.

"Money is needed for birth control. If a couple can't spare about 700 kyat (US \$0.60) per month for birth control, there will be an unplanned pregnancy in the family. Half of the poor families I meet simply cannot afford family planning," said the gynecologist.

Birth control pills are available in Burma, and are the cheapest means of preventing pregnancy. But at 700 kyat per month, they are still beyond the means of most low-income families.

Other methods, such as progesterone hormone injections, are even more prohibitively expensive. An injection that provides three months of protection costs 1,500 kyat (\$1.30), while a one-month shot is 3,000 kyat.

Even condoms, the most widely promoted form of birth control, are beyond the means of many ordinary Burmese. Although they cost just 200 kyat (less than 18 cents), this is far more than the average worker earning 1,500 kyat a day can afford.

Sterilization is also not an option for most, since it is illegal for women under 35 years of age (most who seek abortions are between 25 and 40 years old).

Abortions by properly qualified medical professionals are also out of the question for most women in Burma. If a nurse or health assistant performs the procedure, it costs around 50-100,000 kyat (\$44-88)—a small fortune for Burma's poor.

This leaves only back-alley abortions, which cost a mere 5-20,000 kyat (\$4.40-17.80). For those who experience life-threatening complications or find themselves facing criminal prosecution, however, there is a far higher price to pay.

NEWS ANALYSIS : Cooler Approach, but Business as Usual with Junta

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

By WILLIAM BOOT

BANGKOK — Thailand's first prime minister from outside the Thaksin Shinawatra political stable since 2001 is unlikely to alter relations with Burma, especially in business, say analysts and observers.

Abhisit Vejjajiva, a 44-year-old British-born and Oxford-educated economist, has vowed to usher in an era of clean politics and sweeping reforms, but he is going to be very preoccupied with just holding on to power and trying to stave off a recession, Thailand watchers say.

Without giving a clear indication of his policies, Abhisit, the country's third prime minister in as many months, says his priorities will be to heal domestic rifts and restore the economy after months of political unrest.

Pro-democracy groups are hopeful that Abhisit will place the issue of human rights, particularly in neighboring Burma, higher up the agenda, but with Thailand's economy in free-fall, domestic economic concerns are likely to take precedence.

"It's quite likely that Abhisit will take a more distant, cool approach toward the Burmese junta, especially in view of their continuing crackdown on pro-democracy activists, but it is unlikely to substantially change major business links," said an official at a European Union embassy in Bangkok, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Human rights groups would love to see Abhisit take a swipe at the generals, but he is going to be too preoccupied with the Thai political pot."

Previous Thai governments have courted Burma's regime, desperate to secure much needed gas and energy for Thailand's rising domestic demand. Thailand's gas imports alone provide the military junta with 30 percent of its hard currency.

"Thailand's mid-to-long term energy needs are linked with projects now under way in Myanmar (Burma), and so I think it would be difficult for new prime minister Abhisit to withdraw from any of them," said energy industries consultant Sar Watana in Bangkok.

PTTEP is drilling for gas in Burma's Gulf of Martaban and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand is engaged in hydroelectric schemes on the Salween River.

"In both cases, Thailand has already diluted its financial liabilities by inviting in Chinese firms to take a share, and shoulder some of the risks," said Watana. "Thailand needs energy from Myanmar—regardless of who is running things on either side of their joint border."

On Wednesday, the Electricity Authority of Thailand (EGAT) announces that they will next year set up a joint venture to develop the Haygyi dam construction project on the Salween River in Burma, according to *The Nation*, an English-language newspaper in Bangkok.

The report said that EGAT, the Chinese state enterprise Sinohydro Corp and Burma will form a consortium to operate the 1.4-gigawatt plant. EGAT will own 45 percent; China 40 percent and Burma 15 percent.

The newspaper said China will fully finance the construction, costing an estimated US \$1.4 billion. Energy from the dam will be put to work in Thailand starting around 2015.

Production cost will be \$4.50 per kilowatt per hour, and the project is expected to produce a 19 percent return on investment.

The hydro energy project, along with others on the Salween River, has been strongly opposed by local environmental groups and human rights organizations that fear minority groups will be displaced without proper recourse.

So some villages near Mae Hong Son, Thailand, are expected to be flooded as a result to the project.

[COMMENTARY: A Toast to Asean](#)

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 17, 2008

By KYAW ZWA MOE

Officials toasting Asean's new charter in Jakarta on Monday marks a peculiar moment in regional political history.

While the officials themselves were full of praise and positive comments, the 500 million people in the region may be asking themselves has the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) ever done anything to actually change their lives since it was formed?

The objective answer is very little as a staunch defender of democracy and human rights.

When Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said: "This is a momentous development when Asean is consolidating, integrating and transforming itself into a community," people can rightly be skeptical.

After all, when Asean debated the new charter that also contains a human rights section, the rogue state of Burma, a full Asean member, was at the table arguing against any interference in its internal affairs.

The Burmese government even signed the charter in July. Nyan Win, the Burmese foreign minister, said the signing "demonstrates our strong commitment to embrace the common values and aspiration of the people of Asean to build... a sharing and caring community."

This is the same rhetoric that has come out of Asean for decades, leading many observers to lose faith in the regional body as a defender of democracy and human rights.

Only a few months later, the junta's puppet courts began handing out harsh prison sentences to more than 200 people from monks to relief workers to leading political activists, sentences of up to 68 years imprisonment.

The lengthy imprisonments were not enough for the junta, only days later almost all of the newly imprisoned activists were transferred to remote prisons outside Rangoon, more systematic, psychological torture not only for the political prisoners but also for their families who have to spend more time and expense to maintain contact.

Most Asean officials have recognized Burma as a "problem child" ever since the grouping embraced the junta as a full member in 1997. At that time, some Asean officials may have optimistically believed that its fellow nations could influence the outlaw military government for the better. There is no evidence of that ever happening for the past 11 years.

For Asean to embrace Burma, giving it a protective cover of respectability, is surreal and macabre.

Asean has constantly been on the defensive, deflecting calls from Western nations to do more with its policy mantra of "non-interference" in domestic affairs.

In fact, the new Asean charter has no provision to sanction anti-democratic members like Burma where human rights violations are rampant.

The updated rhetoric in the new charter will be a challenge for several member-nations to meet, especially authoritarian regimes like Burma, Vietnam and Laos. In fact, the whole issue of democracy and human rights in Southeast Asia runs hot and cold in all nations, including founders Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

All have blemished records, most recently Thailand, which postponed a scheduled Asean Summit in December because of political strife. The summit is now set for February.

Human rights issues are clearly the new hot potato for Asean. Its charter has no teeth, no provisions for sanctions, suspension or expulsion against member states. You may rightly ask, what's the point of having a human rights section if Asean can't even expel a state for gross, systematic violations, such as Burma?

Will the Burmese generals fear the Asean human rights charter? The generals will continue to suppress the Burmese people and manipulate Asean, using the time-tested, non-interference principle in domestic policies.

As a result, Asean will continue to dance to the junta's tune.

The real problem is in the politics within Asean member states. The governments simply lack a strong belief that democracy and human rights abuses are important enough to defend and fight for in ways that would effectively penalize member states.

In spite of the new Asean charter and its human rights pact, don't expect any big changes to come from Asean in the future. It will be business as usual when it comes to member states that practice anti-democratic values and abuse human rights.

[Myanmar journalists face intimidation, pressure from junta](#)

The Jakarta Post | Wed, 12/17/2008 11:14 AM | World

ID Nugroho and Lilian Budianto , Journalists working in military-ruled Myanmar continue to face intimidation, torture and arrests in reporting on the country's corrupt and brutal regime, despite international calls for more press freedom, a conference on media safety heard Tuesday.

A Myanmar journalist, who asked not to be identified, told the conference that contrary to government claims, journalists in the country were treated as "dangerous enemies".

"There is no freedom for Burmese journalists to write about political and social conflicts," he said while asking that pictures of him and his colleague not be taken, out of safety concerns.

The Regional Conference on Creating a Culture of Safety in the Media in Asia-Pacific was organized by the International News Safety Institute (INSI) from Dec. 15-16, and brought together participants from 11 countries.

Mon Mon Myat, of the Burmese Journalist Protection Committee, said the junta had set up rules under a 2006 law on electronic media and 1996 law on film and computers that restricted how journalists could work.

Under the laws, journalists are not allowed to take pictures that might "pose a threat" to the government, with offenders facing up to 59 years in prison. Internet users are also under strict surveillance by the government, which requires service providers to check every five minutes websites visited by users and to immediately report suspicious or dangerous activities.

In 2008, 12 journalists and bloggers were arrested in Myanmar, the protection committee says. Several popular websites, including *yahoo.com* and *hotmail.com*, have also been blocked as the junta further isolates its people from the outside world.

"Eighty percent of Internet sites are banned by the government," said Ronald Aung Naing of the Burmese Journalist Protection Committee.

He added the government also monitored people regularly at checkpoints for cameras or video cameras with "dangerous" content.

Eko Maryadi, of the Indonesian Alliance of Independent Journalists, told the forum that although media freedom in Indonesia had improved since the fall in 1998 of former president Soeharto's 32-year regime, journalists still faced intimidation, harassment and lawsuits in reporting on certain issues.

"We have also seen more business groups filing complaints against journalists, claiming the reports harmed their reputation or business. This was rare in the past," he said.

The latest such case is the complaint filed by the Bakrie Group against *Tempo* daily over its reports on the financial problems of the group's top subsidiary, PT Bumi Resources.

The alliance recorded 43 cases of violence against journalists in 2005, with 53 in 2006, 75 in 2007 and 52 cases as of September this year.

The conference closed with a declaration calling on all governments in the region to take responsibility for the safety of all journalists working in their countries and to lift impunity for groups that had endangered the lives of journalists.

[ASEAN summit to be held in February](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 22:05

Chiangmai — The 14th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit which was postponed in early December will be held next year before the end of February according to the Thai government's official website on Tuesday.

The official web page of Thai Government Public Relations Department, office of the Prime Minister today announced there has been an agreement between ASEAN Foreign Ministers for the meeting to be fixed for February.

"The Foreign Ministers of ASEAN Member States, at a special meeting in Jakarta on December 15, agreed that the summit will take place in Thailand before the end of February 2009," said the Office of the Prime Minister on its official website.

"Concerning the 14th ASEAN Summit to be hosted by Thailand next year, the new Prime Minister expressed his full support for the operations of Thailand as Chair of the ASEAN," said the government.

It continued, "He agreed to the Foreign Ministry's recommendation that the 14th ASEAN Summit be held at the earliest opportunity as soon as a new government is able to fully perform its duties."

Initially, the summit was postponed to next year March, whereas it was originally scheduled for December 15 to 18, due to political hostilities in the country between the opposition party People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and former Prime Minister Somchai Wongsavat and his People Power Party (PPP).

The decision came a day after the new 27th Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the Democrat Party was appointed to lead the country.

[Pro-junta group gearing up to contest elections](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 18:10

by The The, Myint Maung

New Delhi – Amid the myriad protests over fresh polls in Burma by most of the opposition forces, a pro-junta group led by a former student activist is preparing to contest the general election scheduled to be held in 2010.

The 88 Generation Students and Youth Organization (Union of Myanmar) which supports the junta's economic and political policy will contest the 2010 general elections and be a part of the junta's roadmap to democracy.

"We haven't yet chosen the name of our party but we are preparing to contest and gearing up when the government enacts the political party registration law and election law," Aye Lwin said to Mizzima.

This group has started canvassing work since September 2007 in Burma. They have been to Rangoon Division, Mandalay, Pegu, Magwe, Sagaing and Irrawaddy Divisions, Karen, Mon and Rakhine States where they conducted political and organizational work. They also met local elders, local businessmen and journalists in these areas in their campaign tour.

"We are organizing like-minded people among the citizens and are persuading them to join us politically. Now we have completed the work in six Divisions and three States," Aye Lwin said.

Former Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) student Aye Lwin was one of the student leaders who led the nationwide uprising in 1988, for transforming Burma to a multi-party democracy. But he later turned against and became a critic of main opposition forces including Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders.

Moreover his group vehemently protested against the economic sanctions imposed by the United States and European Union.

The 'Committee Representing People's Parliament' (CRPP) which comprises of elected MPs from the 1990 general election and other pro-democratic forces have rejected the junta announced election. The junta refused to honour the people's verdict in the 1990 general election and these elected MPs were denied convening the Parliament.

"This is their plan. But we have no plans to canvass and we will not accept the 2010 general election. The junta did not discuss with lawful political parties which have an official standing. We will not contest this election unless they amend the constitution. If they amend the constitution, we will consider contesting the election based on how they amend and what they amend," Aye Thar Aung from CRPP said.

Magwe Division Yenanchaung Township National League for Democracy (NLD) Chairman Khin Saw Htay said that this constitution will give the junta the license to kill.

"The constitution will give license to kill to the junta so we cannot contest the election to be held within the framework of this constitution. It seems like kneeling down before them to be killed. So we cannot accept it in totality. We protested against the constitution and now we will protest the fresh elections," she said.

"There is a lot of difference between a political careerist (opportunist) and genuine politicians. Why should we contest this election? They didn't hand over power to the election winning party in the 1990 general elections. This time they will certainly not hand over power to the NLD even if it wins. We cannot be good and genuine politicians if we contest this election within the framework of this new constitution. It is like pushing our country into the killing fields. It is like killing a dying man," she added.

Politicians in Burma expect the laws for the 2010 election to be enacted and declared at the end of this month as a part of the junta's Seven-Step Roadmap for transition to democracy.

[More Calls for Ban to Visit Burma](#)

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 16, 2008

By SAW YAN NAING

Political observers and leaders of opposition and ethnic groups in Burma said they would like to see UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon return to the country to push for political reform, even as they expressed doubts about his chances of persuading the ruling junta to change its ways.

Nyan Win, a spokesperson for the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), said on Tuesday that Ban's last visit to Burma in May signaled that the UN chief was not ready to tackle the country's political problems.

"There was no discussion about politics with the Burmese government during his previous trip," said Nyan Win. "That was not a good sign."

Ban's visit came several weeks after Cyclone Nargis hit the populous Irrawaddy delta on May 2-3, leaving more than 140,000 people dead or missing. During the visit, he met with junta officials, including Snr-Gen Than Shwe, in an effort to get them to allow international aid workers into the country.

Cin Sian Thang, chairman of the Zomi National Congress in Rangoon, also said that it would not be easy for Ban to achieve much if he returned to Burma.

"We hope it will be fruitful if he comes, but it all depends on what the Burmese regime does," he said.

Speaking with *The Irrawaddy* on Tuesday, Thakin Chan Htun, a veteran politician in Rangoon, said that it was very important for Ban to meet with Than Shwe, head of the Burmese junta.

He added, however, that the UN general-secretary probably didn't want to return to Burma because he didn't think he would have a chance to talk about politics with Than Shwe.

Win Min, a Burmese political analyst in exile, agreed.

"It is likely that he doesn't want to visit Burma as there has been no political improvement until now. If his trip doesn't have any effect, he will be criticized like [UN Special Envoy Ibrahim] Gambari," said Win Min.

The UN general-secretary has repeatedly called for the release of political prisoners in Burma, and earlier announced that he would visit the country again in December. He later changed his mind, however, saying that didn't think the visit would serve any purpose under the current circumstances.

"We understand that he doesn't want to come because he hasn't received a green light from the Burmese government, but we want him to come anyway," said Cin Sian Thang.

Last week, more than 100 former world leaders urged Ban to visit Burma by the end of December to persuade the Burmese regime to release all political prisoners, including detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The move came after the UN secretary-general said at a press conference in October that he would visit Burma only when he sees the possibility of achieving progress toward the goals the UN has set and is certain his visit would yield tangible results.

A former Italian foreign minister, Piero Fassino, who is the European Union's special envoy to Burma, said that a visit by the UN general-secretary to Burma would activate talks with opposition groups.

"We believe that a personal initiative by Ban Ki-moon could prove positive in establishing a serious dialogue between the military, democratic opposition and ethnic minorities, which has not yet taken place," Fassino was quoted as saying in a report by *Deutsche Press-Agentur*.

[Burmese women in exile honoured with Madeleine K. Albright Award](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 17:09

by Salai Pi Pi

New Delhi - A US based organization promoting democracy gave the 4th annual Madeleine K. Albright Award to Burmese women for their efforts on promoting human rights and women's participation in political movements in Burma.

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) at its awards luncheon on December 15 handed the Madeleine K Albright Award to Women's League of Burma, an umbrella organization of 12 women's groups from different ethnic backgrounds in recognition of its effective work on the participation of women in the democratic movement in Burma.

"Receiving the award will make the world communities, particularly the people from United States, aware of Burmese women's activities in political movement in Burma," Thin Thin Aung, Coordinator of Political Empowerment Programme, Women's League of Burma told Mizzima.

The WLB is at present training women on political leadership skills, advocates women's empowerment, inter-ethnic understanding, national reconciliation, peace and democratic reforms in Burma.

The NDI in a press release said that WLB will use the \$25,000 grant for the present six-month political capacity building programme, in which young women from various ethnic backgrounds from Burma have enrolled. The programme is being conducting at WLB's Women Leaders School in Thailand.

"The Madeleine Albright grant will make it easier for members of the Women's League to stand with their sisters and brothers – with OUR sisters and brothers – in keeping alive the dream of a country and a government worthy of its people," Madeleine Albright, NDI's Chairman at the Democracy Luncheon said.

Madeleine Albright during her tenure as State Secretary in the Clinton administration strongly criticized Burma's repressive policies and supported the role of the U.N. urging the Burmese regime to begin a dialogue with democratic opposition parties.

She also met Burmese democracy opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 1995.

Madeleine Albright, in recently released report on preventing genocide, urged US, if necessary, to use military force to intervene in the human rights abuse committed by the Burmese military regime.

The report also labeled the existing situation in eastern Burma, where over 650,000 people have been displaced and some 3,500 villages destroyed as the Burmese Army continues with its attacks and coercive policies against local ethnic minority populations, as genocide.

Thin Thin Aung expected that Madeleine Albright will continue to press the world communities including a new Obama administration to be in office from next year and Burma's neighbouring countries to push the Burmese military regime to speed up democratic reforms in the country.

"We expect that there will be more binding resolutions by the international community to pressurize the Burmese regime," Thin Thin Aung said.

NDI today also presented the 18th W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award to Archbishop Tutu for his work on the democratic transition in South Africa and his advocacy for restoring democracy in nations including Burma.

Opinion: [Glimmers of hope for Burma](#)

Partnership for a Secure America | December 16th, 2008

by Brian Vogt On Monday I attended the [National Democratic Institute's annual luncheon](#) that featured several awards given to prominent democrats (with a small D). Although much of the public was particularly interested in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's acceptance of the W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award, I was struck by another award that was given to a much lesser known recipient. The [Women's League of Burma](#), represented by Thin Thin Aung, received the 2008 Madeleine K. Albright Award for its work promoting human rights and women's political participation in Burma. It is activists such as these

around the world that are the face of democracy to so many who know only oppression from authoritarian regimes. The military junta of Burma certainly fits that bill, as demonstrated in its complete disregard for its citizens' livelihoods in the aftermath of cyclone Nargis that struck this past May. After rebuffing many offers of aid, just days after the hurricane hit, the military junta went ahead with a sham referendum on a new constitution that would cement its role in the future governance of the country.

Many are dismayed at the seemingly never ending stream of news reporting oppression and authoritarianism that come out of Burma. Although there is much cause for concern, there are also glimmers of hope. The Women's League of Burma is one of those points of light that demonstrates that the spirit of democracy is alive in Burma. Despite continuous attempts by the military junta to silence its critics, groups such as the Women's League of Burma show us that even in the most oppressive environments, yearning for self determination can not be completely extinguished.

The Women's League of Burma is training young Burmese women activists in the Thai border area who then risk their lives when they return to their country to document human rights abuses such as forced prostitution and human trafficking by the military junta and organize citizens to promote a greater role for women in Burmese society.

Many point out that the US actually has limited influence over the Burmese regime. This is all the more reason for the US government to be supporting democrats such as those in the Women's League of Burma. Support of such pro-democracy groups should be enhanced as we look to fashion a stronger policy towards Burma that promotes democratic development.

However, that is not all that must be done. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is another leverage point where the US should be focusing much of its attention. For years ASEAN has taken an approach that has emphasized engagement over isolation. Many ASEAN members are now realizing that this policy of engagement has not worked and it has allowed the military junta in Burma to dig in its heels even further. Targeted sanctions, however, can only be effective when there is broad agreement and acceptance on their use. ASEAN can play an important role here. As Derek Mitchell and Michael Green pointed out in this [2007 Foreign Affairs article](#), a coordinated strategy amongst the US and ASEAN would be a step in the right direction.

Of course, the real points of leverage are China and India. Getting India on board will be the easier task. The real conundrum is China - not just on Burma - but on numerous other places such as Darfur where it plays a spoiler role thwarting attempts to provide a united front against an oppressive regime. One of the great challenges of the Obama administration is to find a way to encourage China to play a responsible role in the international community and to have a stake in multilateral actions that might be perceived domestically as undermining Chinese interests. The key is to alter that internal calculation that the Chinese face, showing them that in the long run, they benefit from multilateral international engagement.

Although there is much reason for dismay about the situation in Burma, there remains hope for a democratic change. Such change will come about from a variety of factors. Two important factors that will surely play a role will be that of individual democracy activists on the ground in the country and coordinated international pressure.

[Junta bans popular Buddhist monk's sermon](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 19:25

by Myint Maung

New Delhi – The Burmese military junta authorities in Rangoon Division have banned a sermon by abbot U Thumingla, organizers and friends said.

The ban order becomes effective when the sermon is to be held on December 18. Abbot U Thumingla became popular among religiously conscious Buddhists recently. The abbot is from Migadarwon monastery, Mandalay.

The abbot is 40 years old and has been into 20 years of monk hood. The organizers of the sermon preaching ceremonies and the monk community in Rangoon said that the authorities banned his sermons

which were to be held soon in Minglataungnyunt, Mayangon and North Okkalapa Townships in Rangoon Division.

The sermons of U Thumingla entitled 'Sasana will diminish when the sermon preaching ceremonies diminish', 'be swallowed by earth fissures shortly,' 'Khat Tine Khan' and 'Need to know how to choose a good leader' are popular among the people.

U Thumingla is currently away from Mandalay and is now into sojourns in Hmawbi, Rangoon Division. His sermons are also banned in Mandalay, an abbot said when Mizzima contacted the Masoyane monastery in Mandalay over telephone.

In his 'Need to know how to choose a good leader' preached in Hlaingtharyar Township in August 2008, he told the audience that they should choose a good and reliable leader like Lord Buddha.

During this sermon the abbot said that now there were many Saturn like in ancient times. In the 'Khat Tine Khan' sermon, he said that some people wished the deadly cyclone hit them (the rulers) instead of the people. The abbot told his audience it was only because of their doing meritorious deeds which has protected them from suffering. When these good deeds are exhausted they will certainly face this sort of fate.

A local resident from Sanchaung Township also said that in 'Be swallowed by the earth fissure shortly', the abbot said that not only the higher authorities, even the lower level authorities like judges will be swallowed by earth fissures if they committed evil deeds by insulting the religion and monks. Insulting a single monk means insulting the entire order of the Sangha (monk). So I'd like to urge the 'State Sanghanayaka Committee not to be passive in silence, the abbot preached in his sermon, the local resident said.

An official from the State Sanghamahanayaka Committee declined to say anything regarding the ban on the sermon preaching ceremonies of U Thumingla when Mizzima contacted his office over telephone.

The organizers of the religious ceremonies have to submit their applications to different levels of religious authorities from Ward, Township, and District level Sanghamahanayaka Committees in advance for their permission. They also have to sign a pledge not to include political matters in the religious sermons.

[Afro-Asian organization demands release of Burmese political prisoners](#)

Mizzima - Tuesday, 16 December 2008 19:45

by Nam Davies

New Delhi – A social consortium of Asian and African non-governmental organizations (NGOs) today collectively called for the release of all political prisoners in Burma, including democratic opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), comprising over 30 NGOs and social organizations from 28 countries, demanded the release of the Burmese prisoners of conscience on Tuesday, at the conclusion of their three day congress in India.

"The resolution was passed unanimously with no objection. Though China didn't give their nod to this resolution, they didn't object to it either," Kyaw Than of the All Burma Students League (ABSL) said. ABSL is party to the AAPSO under the moniker of the Burma Democracy and Peace Council.

According to the Burma resolution, the delegates condemned the junta's brutal suppression of protesters in September 2007's Saffron Revolution and protested against the handing down of harsh prison terms to detained, innocent peaceful demonstrators. They also agreed to strive for the realization of a comprehensive and substantial dialogue through the United Nations based on the result of the 1990 general election.

"We shall present the Burma resolution to the United Nations Security Council, probably in early January next year," Kyaw Than said.

The congress was held in Hyderabad in India at the Hotel Taj Decan for three days. The delegates focused discussion on oppression in Asian and African countries, including Burma, agreeing on the need for increased cooperation among members.

AAPSO, with national committees in over 90 countries from Asia and Africa, was founded on the basis of peace, equality, human rights, development, the fight against apartheid and the anti-colonial struggle.

The first congress of AAPSO was held at its head office in Cairo, Egypt, in 1957.

Burma: Lawyer's Testimony Highlights Distorted Justice: ASEAN Should Monitor Jailed Activists

Human Rights Watch - December 16, 2008

(New York, December 16, 2008) - Burma's military government has used the country's legal mechanisms to intimidate political prisoners and to deny them access to justice, Human Rights Watch said today, citing new testimony from a defense lawyer who has just fled the country. In a crackdown that started in October 2008, Burma's courts have sentenced over 200 political and labor activists, internet bloggers, journalists, and Buddhist monks and nuns to lengthy jail terms.

With the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Charter having entered into force on December 15, Human Rights Watch urged ASEAN to dispatch an eminent independent legal team to monitor the trials and conditions of activists held in isolated prisons.

"The government locks up peaceful activists, sends them to remote prisons, and then intimidates or imprisons the lawyers who try to represent them," said Elaine Pearson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "This abuse of the legal system shows the sorry state of the rule of law in Burma."

Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min, a 28-year-old lawyer from Rangoon, fled to Thailand several days ago after weeks in hiding. In late October 2008, a Rangoon court sentenced him to six months in prison under Section 228 of the Burmese Penal Code for contempt of court. He failed to intervene, on the judge's order, after his clients turned their backs on the judge to protest the way they were being questioned.

Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min had been defending 11 clients, all members of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Three other lawyers - Nyi Nyi Htwe, U Aung Thein, and U Khin Maung Shein - were arrested and sentenced to terms of four to six months in prison on the same charges. Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min learned of the charges in advance and went underground.

He described to Human Rights Watch the secretive workings of the Burmese legal system and the way in which political prisoners are denied access to fair trials. He said political activists awaiting sentencing in prison can meet with their defense lawyers only at police custody centers with police and intelligence officers present. Trials are often shrouded in secrecy, with lawyers not informed when their clients are to appear in court. Lawyers representing political prisoners face arbitrary delays when requesting assistance from authorities or documents such as case files, he said.

Human Rights Watch has already documented problems with the current unfair trials, including lack of legal representation for political prisoners. Among the hundreds sentenced in recent months, in late November a Rangoon court sentenced prominent comedian and social activist Zargana to 59 years in jail for disbursing relief aid and talking to the international media about his frustrations in assisting victims of Burma's devastating Cyclone Nargis.

Many political prisoners have recently been transferred to isolated regional prisons where medical assistance is poor or nonexistent and food is scarce. During the past few weeks, authorities sent Zargana to Mytkyina Prison, in the far-north Kachin State; the '88 Generation Students leader, Min Ko Naing, was transferred to the northeast Kentung jail of Shan State; and internet blogger Nay Phone Latt, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison for posting anti-government material on his website, was sent to the far-south prison at Kawthaung, across from Ranong in Thailand.

The newly-in-force ASEAN Charter sets out principles such as adhering to the rule of law and protecting and promoting human rights to which all members states, including Burma, should adhere. But compliance provisions are weak. ASEAN faces a considerable challenge in addressing Burma's lack of respect for human rights in the lead-up to multiparty elections in 2010.

Human Rights Watch urges Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan of ASEAN to dispatch an independent legal assessment team to monitor the treatment of political prisoners in Burma's courts and prisons. Human Rights Watch said ASEAN should also address Burma's lack of respect for the rule of law when it holds its rescheduled ASEAN summit meeting in early 2009.

"This is a test for ASEAN," said Pearson. "If ASEAN lets Burma get away with this farce of justice, the ASEAN Charter really is worthless."

Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min's account to Human Rights Watch

Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min was admitted to the Burmese Bar earlier in 2008. Since 2007, he has played a lead role in trying to represent activists charged under a raft of spurious laws, and he has been arrested several times for his political activities.

On October 23, he and another lawyer were defending 11 clients, members of the NLD, in Hlaingtharya Court, Rangoon on a range of charges related to peaceful political activities in 2007. Some of the defendants turned their back on the judge, U Thaung Nyunt of the Rangoon Northern District Court, to protest the unfair way defendants were being questioned by the prosecution. The judge instructed the lawyers to stop the defendants' behavior. According to Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min: "We both said to the judge, 'We don't want to forbid our clients from doing anything, because we are defense lawyers and we act according to our clients' instructions.' The judge stopped the proceedings and set another court hearing date."

The next day, court officials informed Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min that his contempt-of-court hearing was set for October 30. Days later, at the courthouse, he saw and overheard a police officer and an assistant judge conspiring to arrest him. He fled and went into hiding.

[AK-47s—Made in Wa State](#)

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 16, 2008

By LAWI WENG

The United Wa State Army (UWSA), an armed ethnic ceasefire group based in Shan State, northern Burma, is manufacturing arms and ammunition for use by its own battalions and to sell to other armed groups in the region, according to sources close to armed groups in Shan State.

Speaking to *The Irrawaddy* on Tuesday, Sai Sheng Murg, the deputy spokesman of the rival Shan State Army-South (SSA) said, "For more than one year now, the UWSA has been manufacturing AK-47 rifles similar to those made in China."

Another source close to the UWSA said, "They (the UWSA) learned how to make arms from the Chinese.

"The arms and bullets the Wa produce are not only for their own battalions. They sell the arms to their ethnic allies in Shan State," he added.

There are several armed ethnic groups in the northern region, including the Shan State Army, the Kokang, Mongla and Kachin.

Currently, the munitions factory is situated in Kunma, the hometown of UWSA Chairman Bao You-xiang, in the Wa hills 125 kilometers (78 miles) north of the group's headquarters at Panghsang on the Chinese border, said the source.

According to a *Jane's* security report on December 12, the UWSA has turned to arms production to supplement their income from arms and drugs trafficking. The report said that the UWSA facility marks the first time an insurgent group in the region has succeeded in setting up a small-arms production line.

In May, *Jane's Intelligence Review* reported that the UWSA were acting as traffickers and middlemen, buying from Chinese arms manufacturers, then reselling the weapons to Indian insurgent groups and the Kachin Independence Army, which has also signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military government.

The UWSA has an estimated 20,000 soldiers deployed along Burma's borders with Thailand and China, according to Burmese military analyst Aung Kyaw Zaw, while an estimated 60,000 to 120,000 Wa villagers inhabit areas of lower Shan State.

The UWSA signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military in the early 1990s. Leaders of the group, including its commander Wei Hsueh Kang, are wanted by the US government for their roles in the region's drug trade.

[Rice yield down in Bogalay after cyclone](#)

DVB - Dec 16, 2008

The rice yield in areas of Bogalay township in Burma's delta region has dropped this year in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, which struck parts of the country in May this year.

An acre of paddy fields in the affected areas usually yields 40-50 tin of rice, but farmers said the yield was down to 10 tin per acre this year.

One farmer said the decrease was caused by the lack of good rice plants and fertiliser and technical difficulties.

"The price of rice is also dropping," the farmer said.

"The local authorities have taken the relief supplies and sold them on."

Another farmer said local farmers could not afford to plant any more crops.

"Before, an acre yielded about 50 tin, now we only get between 10 and 15," he said.

"The authorities sold off machinery and diesel, and we received nothing."

Rice mill owners are also losing revenue, and many are now operating at a loss.

A third farmer said he thought the government should provide good quality rice seedlings and modern agricultural equipment and should take action against corruption by local officials.

The farmers said they had no alternative source of income, and dismissed recent claims by Burmese prime minister general Thein Sein that there were plenty of opportunities for work in the agriculture sector.

Reporting by Naw Say Phaw

[Prince Alwaleed Receives Myanmar Ambassador to Saudi Arabia to Discuss Philanthropic & Economic Issues](#)

UAE Daily News - 15 December, 2008 07:00:00

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 16th December, 2008 [\[UAE Daily News\]](#): HRH [Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud](#), Chairman of [Kingdom Holding Company](#) (KHC) received at his office in Riyadh His Excellency Khin Zaw Win, Ambassador of Myanmar to Saudi Arabia. The meeting was attended by Ms. Nahla Alanbar, Personal Assistant to HRH the Chairman.

The meeting began as the Ambassador thanked Prince Alwaleed for giving them the opportunity to meet with him as it was his first meeting with HRH since the opening of the Myanmar embassy in Riyadh. The two discussed current economic and social issues, and Mr. Win presented Prince Alwaleed with investment opportunities in Myanmar. The Prince said that he welcomed the ideas for investment in the country and would delegate a KHC team to study them.

Furthermore, during the meeting, the Ambassador discussed philanthropic issues and thanked the government of Saudi Arabia for its contribution to his country. In response, HRH asked the Ambassador to relay his cordial regards to the President and expressed his readiness to extend his humanitarian assistance to Myanmar through the Alwaleed bin Talal Foundation.

In conclusion to the meeting the Ambassador extended an invitation to His Highness to visit Myanmar. In response, HRH thanked the ambassador and promised to visit Myanmar in the near future.

About Kingdom Holding Company:

KHC is one of the worlds most successful and diversified business organizations, highly respected in the field of investment and recognized as an elite player in the Arabian Gulf region and internationally. KHC was founded in 1980 where initially the Company focused on construction activities, housing development and educational projects.

Today, KHC's portfolio has its main interest in hotels and hotel management, financial services, real estate, technology and media. KHC also has stakes in other Saudi publicly traded companies in the various sectors; banking through Samba, food via Savola, industrial through Tasnee and media via SRMG. Other KHC investments include Telecommunications, retail, tourism, consumer and healthcare.

Moreover, the company's portfolio contains many renowned brands and blue-chip companies including Citigroup, Fairmont Raffles Hotels, Four Seasons Hotels, Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts, News Corporation, Time Warner, Songbird Estates (Canary Wharf, London), Apple, PepsiCo, Procter & Gamble, Hewlett Packard, Motorola, Walt Disney Co and Eastman Kodak. In addition to its public company activities, KHC is also extremely active in the area of private equity in Saudi Arabia and developing markets within the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

[Thailand's new PM likely to be more 'pro-Active' on Burma: Activist](#)

Mizzima Monday, 15 December 2008 20:49

by Mungpi

New Delhi - Thailand's opposition leader, Abhisit Vejjajiva, has been elected as the country's new Prime Minister after winning a special vote in Parliament on Monday.

Abhisit, on Monday, won 235 votes, edging out Pracha Promnok who received 198 votes, to become Thailand's 27th Prime Minister.

The 44-year old Abhisit, who was born in Britain, will also become the fifth Prime Minister of Thailand within a period of less than two-and-a-half years.

The election came after Thailand's constitutional court in early December forced former Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat to resign. Somchai and his Peoples Power Party, along with two other parties, were charged for election fraud related to polls convened over a year previously.

While electing Abhisit as the new Prime Minister seems to provide at least a momentary end to the political deadlock that has dragged on in Thailand for months, supporters of the ousted government, known as the red-shirts, on Monday reacted furiously – rampaging through barricades and preventing MPs from leaving Parliament.

While the election of Abhisit as the new Prime Minister signals an end to the immediate political crisis, Burmese pro-democracy activists based in Thailand said Abhisit's new government is more likely to take a pro-active role regarding Burma's politics.

According to Nyo Ohn Myint, in-charge of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the exiled National League for Democracy-Liberated Area (NLD-LA), with his fair knowledge and understanding of political situation in Burma, Abhisit is likely to be more pro-active than other earlier Thai governments.

Abhisit, during a conference on 'Safeguarding Democracy – Role of Opposition,' held in Bangkok on Saturday, acknowledged that Thailand's former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, had used Thailand's foreign policy to make personal deals with Burma's military junta.

Nyo Ohn Myint, who was also a participant in the conference, said Abhisit, during an informal discussion, had promised to be more 'pro-active' towards Burma's political crisis if elected as the new head of state.

"I also made a point to him that, as a neighbor, Burma's political problems impact on Thailand," Nyo Ohn Myint added.

Nyo Ohn Myint said that while it is still too early to predict what will be Thailand's foreign policy under the newly elected Premier, it would look more positive if the leaders do not have any personal business connections with Burma's military rulers.

Thaksin, Thailand's former Prime Minister, now in exile, during his tenure conducted lucrative business deals with Burma's military junta. Critics said Thaksin used Thailand's foreign policy to deal with Burma's military junta for personal gain.

"I believe that if the new elected leaders of Thailand do not have personal business ties with Burma's military rulers, Thailand could take a better position on Burma," Nyo Ohn Myint speculated.

Thailand, with its ongoing political crisis, is unlikely to have Burma as a major focus of its any new foreign policy, but Nyo Ohn Myint said the Thai government is likely to more sympathetic towards Burmese refugees and migrants.

Thailand currently hosts over two million Burmese migrant workers, who are employed in varied fields of work, including the sex industry. Additionally, there are some 140,000 Burmese refugees eking out a survival in nine camps along the Thai-Burmese border.

[Activists urge Canada to assign special envoy to Burma](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 15 December 2008 21:43

by Solomon

New Delhi - Burmese activists based in Canada and their supporters have called on the Canadian government to assign a special representative to pressure Burma's military regime to implement reforms.

At least 10 Burmese organisations in Canada and their supporters including the Parliamentary Friends of Burma (PFB), Burma Watch International (BWI), and Canadian Friends of Burma (CFB) in a joint letter on Friday urged the Canadian Prime Minister to appoint an envoy to Burma.

"With this special envoy, we hope the Canadian government can do more for democratic reforms in Burma," said Kyaw Zaw Wei, spokesman of the groups.

He said, with the Canadian government being supportive of democratic reforms in Burma, it should have a special envoy, who will be able to work together with other envoys, including from the United Nations, United States and European Union to mount pressure on Burma's ruling generals.

Canada has long condemned Burma's military junta for failing to keep its promise to implement changes, and had supported the pro-democracy movement. As a gesture of solidarity towards Burmese refugees, who fled from military persecution in Burma to neighbouring Thailand and India, Canada has accepted thousands of refugees into the country.

The activists also urged Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary General to personally pay a fresh visit to Burma and pressure the ruling junta to release political prisoners, a call that has been made earlier by over 110 former world leaders.

Ban, in response to the world leader's call, has said that he does not find it necessary to visit Burma as there are no signs of change in the country.

[Burmese Defense Lawyer Flees to Thailand, Blasts Regime](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 15, 2008

By SAW YAN NAING

A young Burmese lawyer sentenced to six months imprisonment for questioning court proceedings against his dissident clients has fled to Thailand after a hazardous journey from Rangoon.

Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min, 29, was one of four defense lawyers convicted of contempt of court after complaining of unfair treatment by the Rangoon court. The other three—Aung Thein, Khin Maung Shein and Nyi Nyi Htwe—are being detained by Burmese authorities.

Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min, who escaped to Thailand some two weeks ago, gave a press conference in the Thai-Burmese border town of Mae Sot on Monday, accusing the Burmese courts of allowing themselves

to become tools of the Burmese regime. He had been engaged to represent more than 20 political activists.

In a telephone interview on Monday with *The Irrawaddy*, Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min said: "There are no fair trials in Burma. Defense lawyers are denied the right to defend their clients. The Burmese authority is using the courts to pressure political activists by pronouncing long terms of imprisonment."

By imprisoning young political activists, the Burmese authorities were trying to silence an entire political generation in the run up to the 2010 general election, Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min said.

Among those defended by Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min was the prominent human rights activist Myint Aye, founder of a rights advocacy group known as the Human Rights Defenders and Promoters.

Myint Aye was sentenced to life imprisonment for his alleged involvement in a bomb attack on an office of the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association in Rangoon's Shwepyithar Township on July 1.

According to the state-run newspaper *New Light of Myanmar*, Myint Aye funded the bombing, which it said had been carried out by two members of the opposition National League for Democracy, Zaw Zaw Aung and Yan Shwe. Exiled Burmese dissidents based in Mae Sot had also helped fund the attack, the newspaper alleged.

Saw Kyaw Kyaw Min said Myint Aye was innocent and he accused the Burmese authorities of illegally sentencing him.

About 215 political activists, including members of the 88 Generation Students group, Buddhist monks, cyclone relief workers, journalists and bloggers, were given prison sentences of up to 68 years in a series of trials in November. More than 100 were transferred to prisons in remote areas around Burma, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).

According to rights groups, more than 2,100 political prisoners are estimated to be still behind bars in Burma.

[COMMENTARY: Isolation or Engagement? It's Than Shwe's Choice](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 15, 2008

By AUNG ZAW

Since Gen Ne Win seized power in 1962, Burma has proudly proclaimed its neutrality in international affairs. Under Snr-Gen Than Shwe, the country's "active and neutral" foreign policy remains in place, although many question whether this accurately describes the way Burma now relates to the rest of the world.

Than Shwe's regime has long been a target of Western sanctions, which include a visa ban that prohibits the paramount leader himself from traveling to the West. Relations with neighboring countries are, however, more cordial. This has produced a foreign policy that is more selective than neutral.

Last week, the general who routinely snubs visiting UN envoys welcomed Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, who received Than Shwe's special envoy, Foreign Minister Nyan Win, in September 2007 amid the brutal crackdown on monk-led protests.

State-run papers reported that Than Shwe briefed the Chinese minister on Burma's domestic situation, including the progress of reconstruction work in the cyclone-hit Irrawaddy delta. More importantly, the general reported on the country's "democratic process and economic development, based on the principles of independence and self-determination," according to China's *Xinhua* news agency.

The junta chief also reassured his visitor that Burma continued to value its *paukphaw* (fraternal) friendship with China.

Burmese leaders have traditionally used the term "*paukphaw*" to refer to relations with China. This special relationship has, however, been subject to numerous strains over the years. This was especially true in the 1960s and 70s, when China aided the Communist Party of Burma (CPB).

Although the "big brothers" in Beijing dubbed Ne Win a "fascist," the Burmese strongman was pragmatic and visited China several times to repair ties. He held high-level talks with Chinese leaders and maintained a good relationship. In return, leaders from China also paid several state-level visits to Burma.

But as Ne Win dined with leaders in Beijing, Than Shwe and other mid-ranking officers posted in the northern frontier region in the 1970s and 80s continued the fight against Chinese-backed communists. They would never forget China's efforts to overthrow the government in Rangoon.

Today the CPB is gone, and its troops never did march down to Rangoon. China has been the regime's major ally since the military coup of September 1988, supplying the regime with military and economic aid. Border trade between the two countries has also expanded, to an estimated annual level of US \$1.5 billion.

Now China is planning to build a gas pipeline in 2009, linking Sittwe on the Arakanese coast with China's landlocked province of Yunnan. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) will head the \$2.5 billion pipeline project with a 50.9 percent stake, while Burma's state-run Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) will hold the rest.

Besides the MOGE's stake in the project, Beijing will also be counting on the regime to keep armed groups along the China-Burma border under control.

Although military leaders in Burma have expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of some of the military hardware and jet fighters they have purchased from China, they still appreciate Beijing's unwavering support, including exercising its veto at the UN Security Council.

However, it is important not to overestimate China's influence over Burma. China could also be looking for an alternative to Than Shwe, and like everyone else, Chinese officials are looking at the post-Than Shwe era and beyond the planned 2010 election.

Chinese know that the aid policy and economic cooperation over the past 20 years has not paid off much.

Chinese remain skeptical that the aid, economic cooperation and investment in Burma will translate into meaningful economic development. It is obvious that Burma is descending into a failed state. China is only helping to preserve the regime.

It is unfortunate that China, which once sought to overthrow the Ne Win regime, is now backing one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Than Shwe often tells his generals that as long as he can count on three countries—China, India and Russia—for backing, his regime will survive. Of these three, China is obviously the most crucial.

Increasingly, however, the junta has been looking beyond China for new friends, new markets and economic cooperation.

This month, Burma confirmed that it will open an embassy in Kuwait. Tomorrow marks the tenth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Burma and Kuwait.

Kuwaiti Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah visited Burma in August and signed an agreement on economic and technical cooperation between the two countries.

During a meeting with the visiting prime minister, Than Shwe informed him of his "road map" to "disciplined democracy" and explained the need for the army to safeguard Burma's unity and stability. Deputy Foreign Minister Maung Myint visited Kuwait recently looking to expand Burma's trade and business activities there.

This is not the first time the regime has looked to the Middle East to expand its diplomatic relationships. In 2006, Iran's deputy minister for oil paid a visit to Burma to express his country's interest in cooperating with the junta.

In April of last year, we also saw Burma formally restore its ties with North Korea. Relations between the two countries had been severed for more than two decades after North Korean state-sponsored terrorists

launched a deadly bomb attack on a high-ranking South Korean delegation of politicians who were visiting Rangoon.

However, a clandestine diplomatic relationship had been restored as early as the 1990s. In recent years, North Korean technicians have been seen in Rangoon and in the newly built capital. Well-informed sources reported that North Korean agents usually stay at state-owned guesthouses on the outskirts of Rangoon. The lack of transparency surrounding the North Korean agents' frequent visits to Burma has fueled rumors about the nature of the cooperation between these two "outposts of tyranny."

But even as Than Shwe looks to broaden Burma's diplomatic horizons, it is clear that he remains very selective when choosing potential allies. In May, Cyclone Nargis offered an opportunity to forge friendlier ties with the US and the West, but Than Shwe opted to spurn their offers of assistance because they came in warships.

The paramount leader doesn't really count the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) as an ally, but maintains a normal relationship with the regional grouping. His regime's recent decision to send prominent dissidents to jail demonstrated his disregard for the principles laid out in the Asean charter.

With regard to Burma's closest neighbor, Thailand, we have seen many ups and downs in the relationship over the past two decades. Thaksin Shinawatra, the billionaire Thai prime minister who was ousted in 2006, cultivated close business ties to the Burmese junta. But even during the relatively amicable period of Thaksin's rule, Burma felt compelled to buy state-of-the-art MiG 29 jet fighters from Russia to counter the Thailand's F16 jet fighters.

When looking for new friends, Than Shwe steers clear of countries that take are likely to take issue with his regime's human rights record. His treatment of the democratic opposition and detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and 2,000 other political prisoners are also taboo topics.

To return to Ne Win—the charismatic leader frequently visited Western countries for medical treatment or annual vacations. Ne Win and the ministers and generals who served under him acquired a taste for the finer things the West had to offer, even if they had no appetite for Western democratic values.

Ne Win had bank accounts in Switzerland and liked to stay in London. He and top leaders had TVs and video players long before Burma officially introduced these marvels of technology in the late 1980s. Top leaders and their wives were encouraged to go to hospitals in Europe when they needed to have check-ups—not to Singapore, where Than Shwe regularly visits for medical examinations.

Ne Win and his senior ministers often visited Europe to get aid and loans. The former Federal Republic Germany, or West Germany, was a favorite destination. Germany's Fritz Werner Company helped Burma to build an arms industry as early as the 1950s to suppress ethnic insurgency.

Thanks to his "engagement" with the West, Ne Win even received military assistance from the US to suppress narcotics in the 1970s. US-made helicopters were also used to attack ethnic civilians and insurgents, but there was no protest from Washington.

Under Ne Win, Burmese army officers were not only sent to Asian nations but also to the US and UK for military education. Under former spy chief Gen Khin Nyunt, dozens of army officers were CIA or UK-trained. Ne Win and Than Shwe all benefited from this sort of engagement and cooperation from the West.

Until 2004, Burma's feared secret police agency ran a ruthless and efficient spy network inside and outside of the country. Ironically, this would not have been possible without the contributions of countries that now regard Burma's current rulers as international pariahs.

Every time Than Shwe shakes hands with a visiting state leader or foreign diplomat, critics of his regime shake their heads in dismay at the willingness of many in the world to ignore his egregious crimes against the people of Burma. Than Shwe's occasional forays into international diplomacy may help him to stay in power, but they will do nothing to improve the plight of Burma's oppressed people.

[UN chief visit would help Myanmar: EU envoy](#)

AFP – 15 December 2008

TOKYO — The European Union's special envoy on Myanmar said Monday a visit by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to the military-ruled nation would have a positive impact and trigger dialogue with the opposition.

Ban, who in May made the first visit by a UN chief to Myanmar in almost 45 years, said Friday that the atmosphere was not right for a return trip.

EU envoy Piero Fassino, a former Italian foreign minister, said that a visit by Ban must be "carefully prepared."

"We believe that a personal initiative by Ban Ki-moon could prove positive in establishing a serious dialogue between the junta, democratic opposition and ethnic minorities, which has not yet taken place," Fassino told reporters on a visit to Tokyo.

Last week more than 100 former leaders wrote to the UN chief urging him to travel to Myanmar to secure the release of political prisoners including democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has spent years under house arrest.

Leaders who signed the letter included ex-US presidents George H.W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, ex-Australian premier John Howard, former Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi and ex-Philippine leaders Fidel Ramos and Corazon Aquino.

Fassino, who has not travelled to Myanmar in the year since his appointment, was in Japan as part of a tour of Asian nations.

He called for the world to act now to ensure the fairness of elections that Myanmar's military regime says it will hold in 2010.

"We cannot afford to stay still. We have to act now to obtain democratic guarantees," Fassino said.

"We want Myanmar's society and citizens to decide their own future. We want the 2010 general elections to be held in a fair and free environment," he added.

Ban said on Friday that he was frustrated at the failure of Myanmar's military to restore democracy.

"At this time I do not think that the atmosphere is ripe for me to undertake my own visit there," he said.

But he added: "I am committed, and I am ready to visit any time, whenever I can have reasonable expectations of my visit, to be productive and meaningful."

The European Union and United States have both slapped sanctions on Myanmar, but most Asian countries have focused instead on dialogue. China is Myanmar's main ally, while Japan -- in a rare break with Western allies -- is a major donor to the country.

Fassino said he was visiting Asia in hopes of finding a united front on Myanmar.

"The main concern for Asian countries is to avoid the destabilisation of the region," Fassino said.

"The EU and the US have implemented sanctions to force the opening of dialogue. The assessment of the tools to obtain this objective can differ but the goal is the same," he said.

Fassino said Japan, with its historical ties to Myanmar, had a "very important role to play," especially from next month when it becomes a member of the UN Security Council.

['Momentous' day for ASEAN as charter comes into force](#)

AFP – 15 December 2008

JAKARTA — The Association of Southeast Asian Nations took a major step towards becoming an EU-style community Monday with the passing into force of a new charter setting benchmarks for democracy.

The charter sets out rules of membership, transforms ASEAN into a legal entity and envisages a single free trade area by 2015 for the region of 500 million people.

It came into force with a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers at the bloc's Jakarta secretariat, 30 days after Thailand became the last member to deposit its ratifying documents.

"This is a momentous development when ASEAN is consolidating, integrating and transforming itself into a community," Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said.

"It is achieved while ASEAN seeks a more vigorous role in Asian and global affairs at a time when the international system is experiencing a seismic shift," he added, referring to climate change and economic upheaval.

"Southeast Asia is no longer the bitterly divided, war-torn region it was in the 1960s and 1970s."

ASEAN consists of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

The charter was supposed to have been activated at a summit in Thailand this month but that meeting was postponed by a domestic political crisis which has underscored the fragility of democracy and human rights across the region.

Thai Information Minister Mun Patanotai presided over the presentation ceremony as representative of the bloc's current chair, as the country lacks a foreign minister to do the job.

Thai lawmakers on Monday elected opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva as the country's third prime minister in four months after half a year of crippling protests.

"Democracy -- it's a yo-yo in the system, it's a yo-yo in the region," ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan told reporters.

"Some countries used to be ahead of others, now they are behind. They're all in the process of transforming themselves to become more open, more participatory, more democratic..."

"In spite of the political setback in Thailand, which is now the ASEAN chair country, I believe ASEAN will not and cannot be slowed down."

He said that despite some calls for a new round of protectionism in the face of the global economic meltdown, the bloc agreed that closer economic integration was the best way out of the crisis.

"We also realise that the best way out of this -- and the best protection, best buffer, best shield -- would be to continue ... to bring down our tariffs and non-tariff barriers," he said.

The charter will give ASEAN, often dismissed as a talking shop, greater clout in international negotiations but critics argue that some member states will continue to get away with gross human rights abuses.

The bloc's proposed new rights body has no teeth and the charter has no provision to sanction members like Myanmar, where the junta has kept democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for most of the past 18 years.

The country's secretive junta is under European Union and United States sanctions over its human rights record.

No date has been set for the creation of the planned rights body but a first draft of its terms of reference will be handed over to a meeting of foreign ministers in Thailand in July, officials said.

[Former Myanmar dictator's daughter released from house arrest](#)

AFP – 13 December 2008

YANGON — Officials in Myanmar have released the daughter of the country's former dictator Ne Win after six years under house arrest, police said Saturday.

A senior police official told AFP that Ne Win's favoured daughter Sandar Win, who is now in her 50s, was released late Friday.

"She was released yesterday evening as her detention period was completed," he said, under condition of anonymity.

Sandar Win had been under house arrest at her lakeside home in Myanmar's main city Yangon since 2002 after being convicted on treason charges for plotting a coup.

Her husband Aye Zaw Win and three sons were sentenced to death for the same crime, but remain locked up in Yangon's notorious Insein prison.

Ne Win ruled the country from 1962-88 after ousting Myanmar's first elected post-independence leader U Nu in a coup.

His socialist programme sent the country, once one of Southeast Asia's wealthiest nations, spiralling into poverty. It remains one of the world's poorest nations.

Ne Win resigned in 1988 after a mass uprising against the country's junta, which was crushed in a brutal crackdown that left an estimated 3,000 dead.

He died in December 2002, aged 92, while under house arrest with his daughter.

[Nobel laureates launch appeal for Aung San Suu Kyi](#)

AFP – 13 December 2008

PARIS — Nobel peace laureates urged Europe and the United Nations on Friday to push harder to bring about national reconciliation in Myanmar and the release of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

"We are here today to remind the world of her courage and of the strength of this woman who has been unceasingly fighting for the freedom of her people," said a text read by Northern Ireland peace campaigner Mairead Corrigan Maguire.

Suu Kyi, 63, who won the Nobel prize in 1991, has been detained for most of the past two decades, mostly isolated from the outside world, only receiving visits from her doctor and lawyer.

Maguire was meeting in Paris with fellow Nobel peace prize winners Betty Williams and John Hume of Northern Ireland, F.W. de Klerk of South Africa and Lech Walesa of Poland.

Together, they called on European leaders and institutions and the United Nations to "do their utmost to achieve the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners."

They also urged world leaders to "force the Burma regime to start a peaceful reconciliation process in order to restore democracy and respect for fundamental human rights in this country."

In their declaration, the laureates voiced concern that the drive for reconciliation launched in Myanmar by the United Nations after the political unrest of September 2007, was at a standstill.

"We feel at risk of losing a precious opportunity for peace in Burma," they said.

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, whose foundation co-organised the Paris event but who was unable to attend for medical reasons, sent a message voicing his support for a global campaign in favour of Suu Kyi's release.

Irish rocker-turned-activist Bono, speaking after receiving an annual peace award from the laureates for his global crusade to tackle poverty and disease, paid tribute to Suu Kyi in her absence.

"We should acknowledge the Nobel laureate who should be here, but is not here. That is Aung San Suu Kyi," said the U2 frontman, whose 2001 single "Walk On" was dedicated to the Myanmar democracy icon.

"We have to tell her and send out a message of love. She is still not able to move freely, and we look forward to the day when she will be."

Last week, more than 100 former leaders wrote to UN chief Ban Ki-moon, urging him to travel to Myanmar to secure the release of Suu Kyi and other political prisoners.

But the UN secretary general has ruled out such a visit and expressed frustration at the military regime's failure to take steps toward dialogue with the opposition.

Ban visited Myanmar in May after its military rulers came under international fire for not allowing foreign aid in after a cyclone left 138,000 people dead or missing.

The Nobel winners were meeting in Paris for a three-day annual summit, coinciding with celebrations marking 60 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in the French capital.

Gems auction in Myanmar

Straits Times / AFP - Dec 13, 2008

YANGON - MILITARY-RUN Myanmar announced on Saturday it would hold an auction of precious gems in Yangon early next year, despite economic sanctions banning their international trade.

The auction would be held January 5-9 at Myanmar Gems Pavilion in Yangon, the Burmese-language Myanma Ahlin newspaper said.

Buyers would have to pay an entrance fee of 10,000 kyats (S\$12.70), with a higher charge for foreigners, the paper said.

Sellers would also pay a commission fee of between one and three per cent to the state on top of a jewellery tax, it said.

Myanmar last held a gems auction in October but did not reveal how much it made from the sales.

At an earlier sale in March, 7,700 lots were sold, valued at more than 100 million euros (S\$199 million).

Myanmar, one of the world's poorest countries, is the source of some of the world's most beautiful rubies - a key source of revenue for the ruling junta.

The United States blocked imports of Myanmar's gems in July, passing new legislation to prevent the gems entering US markets via third-party countries.

Europe also intensified economic sanctions on the regime after a deadly crackdown on pro-democracy protesters last year, while Washington and human rights groups have urged gem buyers to boycott the sales.

Myanmar's two biggest customers, neighbouring China and Thailand, have continued to attend the frequently held gem auctions. --

Chin, Faced with Food Shortage, Entering Thailand

Irrawaddy - Friday, December 12, 2008

By LAWI WENG

More than 2,000 Chin migrants from northern Burma who are faced with food shortages have illegally entered Thailand through Three Pagodas Pass in recent months, say sources on the border.

According to sources who are involved in smuggling migrant workers from Burma into Thailand through Three Pagodas Pass, scores of Chin are arriving at the border every day.

"I have smuggled about 500 people [Chin] into Thailand during the last several months," said one source. "They plan to go to Malaysia."

An estimated 60,000 Chin now live in Malaysia or India as migrants or refugees.

Min Thang, a member of the Chin National Council who lives in Mizoram, Indian, said many Chin villagers have abandoned farming after their crops were destroyed this year by an infestation of rats. Women also believe that if they can find work abroad, they can earn enough money to survive and send some back home, he said.

A Chin woman in Sangkalaburi in Kanchanaburi Province in Thailand said it took a week to make the journey from Chin State to Three Pagodas Pass during the rainy season. She said she paid about 150,000 kyat (US \$119) to a smuggler to cross the border into Thailand.

Leaders of the Chin National Council said in August that the Burmese military government was not allowing food supplies donated from foreign countries to reach the areas experiencing a food shortage.

According to a Mizoram-based Chin relief group, the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee, about 100,000 of the 500,000 residents in Chin State face a food shortage, which began in December 2007. Many people are surviving on boiled rice, fruit and vegetables, said the agency.

A famine is said to occur in the area about every 50 years when the flowering of a native species of bamboo gives rise to an explosion in the rat population, experts say. The International Rice Research Institute has warned of "widespread food shortages" in the region.

Rangoon Residents Suffer Power Cuts

Irrawaddy - Friday, December 12, 2008

By SAW YAN NAING

Local residents in Rangoon have been suffering the impact of a strictly limited electricity supply in the city for nearly one week now, according to sources in Rangoon.

Win Maung, a resident in Tamwe Township, told *The Irrawaddy* on Thursday that his house had only been connected to the electricity grid for six hours a day since Monday.

"I was getting a full supply of electricity last week," he said. "But this week, we have electricity for no more than six hour a day."

For the purposes of electricity distribution, the city has been divided into three sectors—A, B, and C. Six hours electricity per day is supplied to each sector on a rotating basis. Sector A receives electricity from 5 a.m. to 11 a.m., Sector B from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sector C from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m.

Despite the strict limits imposed on electricity distribution in the former capital, there has been no official statement by the government, said the sources.

However, observers have said that power cuts are inevitable all over Burma every year in late November and December because it does not rain and there is a lack of water in the country's hydropower dams.

Households in Rangoon regularly receive full access to the electrical grid between June to November—supplemented by the rainy season. However, electricity is usually limited to six hours between late November and June.

The current electricity rationing has affected all local households and companies in Rangoon and has forced certain businesses—such as Internet cafés, printers and local journals—to close their doors during the power cuts.

Adversely, the cost of running a business has increased accordingly, said the sources.

The owner of an Internet café in Rangoon's Sanchaung Township said he cannot make a profit these days. He said that he has to use all his cash flow on buying gasoline to run his shop on a generator. He said he has to close his shop sometimes during the day.

"I'm very disappointed with this," said the shop owner.

The editor of a Rangoon journal, who spoke to *The Irrawaddy* on condition of anonymity, said that he had been running his office on a diesel generator since Monday. He said that he has to buy three gallons of gasoline a day, which costs about 10,000 kyat (US \$8) a day.

On November 24, the head of the Burmese junta, Snr-Gen Than Shwe, told delegates at the 15th annual general meeting of the Union Solidarity and Development Association that there have been huge improvements in the electricity sector in Burma in recent years.

Quoted in the state-run newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*, he said, "There was only 228 megawatts in the past. But [we now have] 977 megawatts, thanks to the Yenwe, Shweli and Kengtawng hydropower plants."

Than Shwe went on to say that efforts are being made to complete 14 new hydropower projects as soon as possible in order to produce more than 10,000 megawatts of electricity to “fulfill the electricity needs of the people.”

[Peter Hitchens: Inside Burma - one of the world's most beautiful and ugliest countries and the last ghost of the British Empire](#)

The Mail on Sunday - 14th December 2008

The Mail on Sunday columnist infiltrates this sinister state and uncovers the Generals' secret new capital

In Burma the people are afraid of their rulers - and the rulers are so afraid of the people that they hide from them in a crazy capital city hundreds of miles from anywhere. The only open opposition comes from a lonely woman in a besieged villa and a troupe of comedians in a tiny back-street theatre, who are forbidden to tell jokes in their native language.

In the strange league of pariah states, where Cuba jostles with North Korea and Belarus for the title of most fear-ridden nation on Earth, Burma is certainly the oddest of all.

You step off the edge of the known world when you go there. The last part of the journey, from Bangkok to Rangoon, takes less than two hours. But it hauls you roughly out of the smooth, the globalised and the familiar into a dark, disturbing place.

Bangkok's gargantuan airport is a bloated celebration of everything we have come to accept as normal. It is a colossal shopping mall with some serviceable runways attached, so immense that the traveller can easily get lost in its hallways, throbbing with the urgent pulse of consumer culture, adorned with every brand name, sparkling and garish at every hour of day or night.

Rangoon, by contrast, is dingy at all hours. It is decrepit and secretive, and perhaps the last city on Earth where the ghost of the British Empire still walks. The great globalist tidal wave of concrete, money and credit, advertising and electronics, which has made the whole world bland, faltered and flopped before it got to Burma.

In Rangoon your mobile phone sits dead in your pocket and your credit card is useless. The internet is busily censored. There are a dozen monasteries and not a single Starbucks or McDonald's. The traffic is reasonable rather than frantic, and often actually sparse. The billboards mostly advertise local products you have never heard of.

It is profoundly poor. Child labour is common and blatant, with small boys toiling on road gangs. There are dreadful, fetid slums within a mile of the heart of Rangoon.

The airport road passes close to the well-named Insein prison, a giant circular fortress of repression which was once the largest jail in our Empire. It is now the hopeless home of many protesters and dissenters who wrongly thought last year that they had a chance of overthrowing the Burmese military regime. Some have just begun truly insane sentences of as long as 65 years.

At the great seaport's heart, tremendous decayed structures of dark brick or heavy stone, like vast Yorkshire town halls or broken-off chunks of Whitehall, rear above the cratered streets and ruined pavements. Several of these relics even have trees growing out of their upper storeys, much as you used to see in Communist East Berlin. In an odd way, Rangoon is a sort of tropical East Berlin, its derelict decay made worse by the sweaty heat.

Slovenly police officers loaf about their sinister headquarters, offering incorrect directions to travellers. Clerks can be seen filling in forms with typewriters, a technology vanished everywhere else but still employed by this unhurried police state.

Gaggles of suspicious soldiers skulk - especially on or near bridges, though they are plainly under orders to stay in the background for now.

The spires of Gothic cathedrals, in cold white stone and livid pink brick, stand out from a skyline that is still only slightly disfigured by concrete tower blocks.

Lovely ornate apartment houses, some dating from before the First World War, crumble gently above narrow, pungent streets laid out long ago by colonial planners who believed British rule would last for ever. You are walking through the ruins of a collapsed civilisation.

When twilight comes, the sensation of being in a lost world grows stronger. Electricity dribbles unreliably and weakly to homes and businesses even here in the richest and most bustling part of the country. Tiny shop fronts and tea shops are lit with candles.

Even where there is power, it is feeble. The windows of the big buildings have a North Korean look, giving off the same greyish, sad light that you see after dark in Pyongyang.

The unbelievable, floodlit golden tower that is the Shwedagon Pagoda, supreme shrine of Burmese Buddhism and the country's single most precious possession, broods over the twilight former capital, reminding you time and again that this is still a profoundly pious country, and one that has - for better and for worse - missed the economic revolution that has transformed the rest of the Far East.

In any other major Asian city, 80-storey hotels and office blocks would long ago have eclipsed it, reducing it to a tourist toy, but here it springs into view from a thousand places, often glimpsed at the far end of squalid lanes, half-observed by webs of knotted power cables and phone lines.

If you walk slowly enough down such lanes, you will find yourself being gently approached by ordinary Burmese, anxious for contact with the outside world. Some crave tourist business - one money-changer even asked me how many people had come in on my flight, so anxious was he for trade. Others begin boldly but clam up when questioned about conditions.

When I asked one man, with excellent English, why he didn't work abroad, he suddenly changed his tone of voice and said: 'This country is so wonderful that nobody could possibly want to leave it,' which I took to mean that he didn't think it safe to discuss such matters.

Many do leave. A whole street seemed to be given over to the offices of agencies offering jobs abroad. Exile of this kind is one of the many curses of Burma, where an educated and intelligent people are held back by a superstitious, ignorant and small-minded state.

In private, people told me how they often have to live for months by pawning their most precious possessions, including the jewels that are a favourite form of saving, working extra hard when the chance comes so as to redeem their goods ready for the next hard time.

When they felt really safe they spat out scornful remarks about General Than Shwe, the psychological warfare expert who heads the Junta. One man pronounced the tyrant's name, paused for five eloquent seconds and then pronounced the word 'Stupid!' with such force that we both collapsed into laughter. Several people complained in low voices that the army stole much of what they earned in oppressive taxes.

One man spoke of the near-impossible hardship of trying to bring up a family on an income of £10 a month, with a 90-minute daily commute from his village, hanging on to the bars of a truck as it bumped among the potholes. Monks revealed that their state rice rations had been withdrawn in revenge for their support of last year's anti-regime protests.

But I tried to make sure that all these encounters were completely untraceable, entirely private and in places where nobody could possibly have overheard. Nobody who spoke to me knew I was a journalist. I was safe enough. If detected by the authorities, I would be expelled, perhaps after a little rough handling. But for them to be caught speaking to me would mean terror and ruin. I was determined not to put any Burmese person at risk if I could help it.

There is open opposition here. Its heart is a forlorn, mildewed house, once lovely but now as attractive as a tomb, which lies next to a great lake in the north of the city.

I managed to get close enough to see the jauntily-painted red and yellow gate, the only place in Burma that can now display the symbols of the once-powerful National League for Democracy. But busloads of armed men lurk down a side-road ready to squash any hint of protest or support.

And I had to view this from the far side of the road. Barbed-wire barricades and inquisitive steel-helmeted police prevent anyone getting near the front door, and the whole road is closed to traffic at night to

prevent visitors slipping in under cover of darkness. This, No 54 University Avenue, is the home of Aung San Suu Kyi, the hauntingly beautiful and tragic leader of the resistance.

Hers is a series of sad stories. Her long-dead father, Aung San, is even now the official hero of the state, a fact that has probably saved her life. He was the acknowledged leader of the independence movement which took Burma out of British control in 1947.

The General, as he is universally known, was a complicated figure who collaborated energetically with the Japanese when it looked as if they were winning, and then developed objections to their methods when they began to lose the war.

He also wears a martyr's crown since he was assassinated before he could take power and so has the blemish-free reputation reserved for politicians who were murdered before they had a chance to make a mess.

His daughter did much of her growing up in India, where she fell under the influence of Gandhi and his rejection of violence. Her refusal to support bloody revolt is now causing hotter heads in Burma's opposition to whisper that she should make way for them.

They will not find it easy to push her aside. Suu Kyi is terrifyingly determined. She amazed and disturbed many of her own supporters when she refused to go to the bedside of her dying husband, the Oxford academic Michael Aris.

She feared, probably rightly, that if she went she would never be allowed back to Burma. Even so, it is a sacrifice that no normal person would have made. Now she must hope that elections promised for 2010 will take place, and that they will at least free her from her house arrest.

But as things stand, she and the Generals must sit and wait in a permanent state of frozen war. They dare not kill her, and she cannot destroy them, but they are the ones in power and she is the one confined to a crumbling suburban house where nobody can go.

Anyway, the Generals have left town, hoping to put themselves beyond the reach of Suu Kyi and the people of Rangoon. In one of the oddest political decisions in human history, they have shifted the capital to the remote, undeveloped middle of the country. It is as if Gordon Brown, sick of being criticised in London, relocated Westminster and Whitehall to the North York Moors.

I tried three times to go to Nay Pyi Taw, the Royal Abode of Kings as this place is called. I couldn't reach it by air, as I couldn't get permission to go on the plane. I couldn't reach it by road, as cars containing foreigners are diverted round it. But I finally succeeded in getting there by taking the Mandalay-Rangoon express, whose tracks run right through it.

It is a bizarre mixture of Milton Keynes, Pyongyang and a Costa del Sol retirement community. You come out of the forest, where pigs roam the dusty streets of tiny villages, and the houses are made of split bamboo and roofed with palm leaves. And all at once it is as if a giant hand has reached down from space and planted a modern metropolis among the sugar cane and the paddy fields. There are vast six-lane highways on which cattle can roam in perfect safety since there is no traffic.

Hidden in low, wooded hills to the west are the secret villas of the Junta. All around the tawny earth has been turned over to prepare the land for ministries, barracks and perhaps another of Burma's enormous jails.

Just to the east, a misty blue ridge of mountains marks the beginning of Shan State, one of Burma's many half-tamed and unsettled tribal provinces.

There is a super-modern railway station, in keen contrast to the ancient train with its wooden seats, careering wildly over buckled tracks so that luggage often tumbles from the racks on to the heads of travellers, who are visibly bouncing up and down as we snort and rattle on our way.

The train does not stop at Nay Pyi Taw, since we have no Generals aboard, but clatters on past streets of kitsch villas and curlicued hotels, propaganda billboards, grandiose office blocks and a majestic but unfinished pagoda, plainly intended to rival the mighty Shwedagon in size if not in grace.

Perhaps it was the great cranes clustered round it but it reminded me oddly of the enormous mosque begun by Saddam Hussein in Baghdad when he was trying to prove he was really a devout Muslim.

Do the Generals fear that they, like Saddam, will be the victims of a Western invasion?

This could explain why they have sited their new metropolis far from the coast, to keep themselves safe from attack or kidnap. They worry too much. Like Iraq, they possess oil and gas but they also have the kindly protection of next-door China, always a ready customer for such things. This puts them in the Mugabe class of dictatorship - subject to frequent rude remarks and critical missions by eminent persons but ultimately safe from invasion.

A more likely explanation is that they are afraid of their own people. Just north of Rangoon's railway station is unsettling evidence of the mistrust between rulers and ruled. A huge barracks sits there, plainly sited so that troops can flood into the city centre in minutes if there is trouble. But look at its walls and you will see that they are full of relatively new loopholes in the brickwork, as if a siege is expected.

The same techniques can be seen on the outer walls of almost every military establishment in Burma. This is not an army to defend the country against its enemies but an army designed to defend the state against the people.

Do they have much to fear? Apart from Aung San Suu Kyi and the monks, whose mild pacifism makes them horribly easy to crush if they rise in revolt, the only flickering trace of opposition is to be found in a rubble-heaped side street on the wrong side of the tracks in Mandalay.

Here each night at 8.30, a small and incredibly brave group of people keep a light of free speech burning in the surrounding darkness. And it is very dark. For Mandalay at night makes Rangoon look like Manhattan.

Night falls here like a thick blanket. You must fumble your way along unlit streets, hoping that you will not fall down one of the many yawning holes in the pavement, down into the stinking drains beneath. Even the state telephone bureau functions by candlelight. And in the few tourist hotels, so empty that the bar staff volunteer to play pool with lonely customers, the air-conditioning and lights frequently fail before the generators kick in.

But do not be put off, for without tourists the symbolic, heroic resistance of the Moustache Brothers would come to an end. They are comedians who dared to mock the regime. For this crime - for tyranny is terrified of laughter - two of them were imprisoned and set to work on chain gangs.

Now released, they perform their act in English, laboriously learned, to tiny foreign audiences on a miniature stage. In truth, the performance is not very funny. But it is utterly magnificent.

It is a heartbreaking and touching thing to see these men and their families daring to say the unsayable, to laugh at the deadly serious, especially in the menacing blackness from which - at any time - vengeance might suddenly emerge.

The brothers, who had no idea that I was a reporter the night they entertained me, joke about the KGB and openly praise Aung San Suu Kyi. By the time I saw this performance I was so used to the air of oppression that I was lowering my own voice before saying anything remotely controversial. Yet these courageous people say such things out loud.

All that protects them is the interest of the outside world. If the tourists stop coming, how long can their brave demonstration go on? The night I watched them, there were four of us in the audience. If the level falls much below this, will the regime feel it is safe to shut them down and throw them in a dungeon? It is an alarming thought and raises the strange question of the international boycott of Burma.

The only guidebook to the country - the teeth-gnashingly politically-correct Lonely Planet - agonises for pages about whether anyone should go there at all. If they didn't, they presumably wouldn't buy the guidebook.

But what strange selective concern this is. I was struck, the whole time I was there, by how similar Burma is to Cuba, right down to the ancient cars, the picturesque decay of the cities, the astonishing, dreamlike natural beauty of the landscape and the uncorrupted charm and humbling honesty of the people.

And that is not to mention the murderous military dictatorship sustained by jittery and guilty old men who hide from sight, and the ever-present surveillance. There is even a heroic dissident leader living under miserable conditions in the heart of the capital - the noble Oswaldo Paya - though because he challenges a dictatorship of the Left, nobody has heard of him.

Yet Lonely Planet does not agonise over whether anyone should go on holiday in Cuba, currently one of the world's most fashionable destinations. It refers gushingly to that unhappy island's tyrant as Fidel and makes lame excuses for his regime, asking for its repression to be viewed 'in a relative context'.

Richard Branson, whose Virgin planes fly to Havana, would no doubt rather have his beard waxed than open a service to Rangoon.

And the PC obsessives of the BBC, who cringingly call Bombay Mumbai and Peking Beijing, still refuse to rename Rangoon Yangon and Burma Myanmar, though the logic of doing so is the same.

The strange selective outrage of those who decided which countries are unacceptable and which are not has a mysterious logic, but I suspect that in this case the Burmese generals have somehow managed to get themselves classified as 'Right-wing', which means that Guardian readers cannot go on holiday there.

I long ago gave up lecturing other countries on how they should run themselves. My duty is to stop my own nation going down the plughole of tyranny, which has in my lifetime become a real and pressing possibility.

Burma sears the brain and the conscience. It is one of the most heart stoppingly beautiful countries I have ever seen, and also one of the ugliest.

On the shores of the majestic Irrawaddy River, children bend their small bodies under heavy baskets of stones in brassy, stunning heat, carrying them on to barges for piece-rate wages of less than a penny a load.

By the serene lake at Amarapura, amputees beg with their crude artificial limbs lying next to their sore stumps. One of the loveliest prospects, the misty, magical view from the top of Mandalay Hill as the sun starts to sink, is crudely spoiled by a sprawling, pale yellow prison in the foreground.

Should we long for a violent uprising, for gunfire in Rangoon, the corpses of monks and splashes of blood around the Shwedagon Pagoda? Should we hope for a Western invasion, British soldiers once again on the Road to Mandalay (where enough of them have already left their bones)?

You may wish for these things if you like. I cannot. I can only say that this is what it is like and hope that in time Burma finds its own kindly, peaceful salvation suited to its immensely gentle people.

In the meantime, if you can, go to see the Moustache Brothers. They may not make you laugh but by heaven they will show you what courage looks like.

[Jailed Activist's Wife Tells Story](#)

Radio Free Asia - 2008-12-13

A woman who has endured the hardship of caring for several jailed relatives talks about life as the member of an activist family.

Aung Tha Nge

Nay Chi, a 31-year-old mother of three and wife of jailed activist Aung Naing, has struggled throughout her life to make ends meet as the member of a politically active family blacklisted by the military government. In 1992, when she was 15, her father was in Mandalay Prison, her mother held at Insein Prison in Rangoon, and her brother at Thayet Prison in central Burma. All were jailed because of their involvement with an outlawed student union.

Her father, Hla Shwe, has been arrested several times since 1962. He most recently served six years in jail because of his work on a book about Burma's 1988 student movement. Her mother, Khin Mar Aye, was arrested in 1993 and served a three-year sentence for joining a protest against the junta's national

convention. Her brother, Set Aung Naing, escaped to the Thai border after being arrested three times between 1988 and 2004.

Despite these hardships, Nay Chi has managed to provide for herself and her children, even while offering her support to her family members. She owns a photocopy machine and runs a private business so she can care for her children and father, but knows the authorities could seize her photocopier at any moment if they believe she is using it to create anti-government leaflets.

Nay Chi's husband, Aung Naing, 39, was a leader of the pro-democracy '88 Generation student movement. He was detained in September 2007 for his involvement in a protest march. In November, he was sentenced to 65-1/2 years in prison and recently transferred, along with other jailed dissidents, to a remote, rural Burmese prison.

Nay Chi told RFA about the harsh journey she undertook to visit her husband for the first time since his transfer to Kalay Prison in northwestern Sagaing division from Insein Prison in Rangoon—while her children, aged four to 12, stayed with her 71-year-old father.

While her husband was imprisoned at Insein, she visited him once a month. But after his transfer to Kalay, doing so has become much harder, she said. Getting to Mawlaik, where Kalay Prison is located, requires two full days of travel because no direct bus route links the two cities, and buses leave at irregular times. Road conditions make for a jarring ride:

"The road between Rangoon and Mandalay is good, but from Mandalay to Kalay, the roads are very rough. It is so bumpy that you cannot sleep on the bus...I could not take my three children because they had school, and besides, the journey is so rough that I didn't think they could handle it. My youngest child is still too young to travel in this way."

"When I got to the prison I was only allowed to see my husband for 40 minutes after traveling all that time. But when I met with him, things were better than I expected. The guards didn't interfere with us and I could talk to him alone—just the two of us."

"As far as I know, [prominent labor rights activist] Su Su Nway is also being held in the prison and there is also another prominent activist from one of Burma's ethnic groups. There are quite a few political activists there."

"The prisoners are given time to exercise and take walks. Political prisoners are kept together in a sort of prison wing—there are 10 rooms situated together to form a kind of unit."

"He told me that he would not drink the tap water at the prison and that the guards had been providing him with bottled water. He said he dare not drink water from the prison lest he contract cholera...I have sent him some preventative medicine for malaria, but the medical officer at the dispensary has taken it all away. When he is feeling ill they said he can ask for the medicine from them."

"Aung Naing told me to only visit him once every six months. He said that he did not want me to endure the hardship of traveling every month, even though we are allowed to see each other more often. He told me to send whatever I wanted, as far as books and medicine go, through the mail to the prison authorities, so that I would not have to travel to bring them. He said to come only when I can manage."

Original reporting by Nay Rein Kyaw for RFA's Burmese service. Service director: Nancy Shwe. Written and produced for the Web in English by Joshua Lipes and edited by Sarah Jackson-Han.

[Harn Yawngwe: Ethnic efforts not in vain](#)

SHAN – 11 December 2008

Recent award given to a detained Shan leader indicates that ethnic leaders are not forgotten and their dedication and their work are not also in vain, according to Harn Yawngwe, Director of the Brussels-based Euro-Burma Office (EBO) and Advisor to the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC).

By Hseng Khio Fah

Khun Htun Oo, leader of the largest party in Shan State, who had been sentenced to 93 year jail sentences at Putao prison, Kachin State, was named the recipient of the Honorary Citizenship Award by

Monza, a town in Italy near Milan on 5 December. The ceremony was held on 9 December and the award was presented to Bodie Saw Min, Secretary of the EBO, on his behalf.

"This is how the world acknowledges our Shan leaders' efforts. They never give up their ideals even though they were imprisoned," said Harn. "Our new generation must also be strong like them until democracy and genuine federalism are won whatever the dangers and difficulties are."

Khun Htun Oo is President of the Burma's second largest party Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD). He was arrested in 2005 together with Gen Hso Ten, leader of the ceasefire group Shan State Peace Council (SSPC), Sai Nood aka Sai Nyunt Lwin, SNLD General Secretary under several charges including defamation of the state, association with illegal parties and conspiracy against the state. All were separately imprisoned:

Maj-Gen Hso Ten	106 years	Khamti prison
Khun Tun Oo (Hkun Htun Oo)	93 years	Putao prison
Sai Nyunt Lwin,	85 years	Kalay, Sagaing division.
Sai Hla Aung	79 years	Kyaukphyu prison
U Myint Than	79 years	Sandoway prison (died on 2 May 2006)
U Tun Nyo	79 years	Buthidaung prison
U Nyi Nyi Moe	79 years	Pakokku prison
Sai Myo Win Tun	79 years	Myingyan prison

Khun Tun Oo's brother, Sao Oo Kya, was also sentenced to 13 years in prison. He is serving his time in Mandalay.

[Myanmar working on Aung San Suu Kyi detention appeal: party](#)

AFP – 12 December 2008

YANGON — Myanmar's military government is working on pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's appeal against her detention but has rejected her lawyer's request to meet her, her party said Friday.

The 63-year-old Nobel Peace laureate has spent most of the past 19 years under house arrest in Yangon and she sent her first appeal in October to the cabinet in the country's new capital, Naypyidaw.

She approved a final draft of the appeal against her detention at her lakeside home during a meeting with her lawyer, Kyi Win, in September, and he asked for permission to meet her last week.

"The authorities summoned lawyer Kyi Win on Tuesday and told him that there is no need to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi as the cabinet is working on her appeal case," Nyan Win, a spokesman for her National League for Democracy, told AFP.

"They did not tell him details. We are also thinking about their message. We cannot guess whether they can release her or not," he said.

"Lawyers are preparing to be ready whenever they start her appeal case."

Aung San Suu Kyi rarely meets anyone except her lawyer and doctor. In August she refused a visit from United Nations envoy Ibrahim Gambari, apparently in protest at the lack of progress he was making on reform in Myanmar.

In September she was given an intravenous drip for malnourishment by her doctor after refusing food deliveries for a month.

"As far as we know, she was in good health after doctor Tin Myo Win visited last week," Nyan Win said.

Meanwhile, a senior NLD member and journalist, Ohn Kyaing, was released Thursday after he was detained for more than nine weeks.

"He arrived back at his home yesterday afternoon. He was in good health. He was mostly questioned by the authorities about helping activities for Cyclone Nargis victims. He was released as he has no guilt," Nyan Win told AFP.

Ohn Kyaing was arrested in October while working as a chairman of the relief committee for Cyclone Nargis at the NLD headquarters in Yangon. The cyclone in May left 138,000 people dead or missing.

About 270 democracy activists including monks, student leaders and NLD members were handed long jail terms in recent weeks for their roles in last year's anti-junta protests and for helping cyclone victims.

"About half of the 270 activists who were sentenced since November were NLD members," Nyan Win told AFP.

Aung San Suu Kyi's party won a landslide victory in 1990 elections but the junta which has ruled the country since 1962 never allowed it to take office.

[Suu Kyi Denied Meeting with Her Lawyer](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 11, 2008

By WAI MOE

Speaking to *The Irrawaddy* on Thursday, Aung San Suu Kyi's lawyer, Kyi Win, said that the Burmese authorities had denied him a meeting with the detained opposition leader to discuss the appeal against her continued detention.

Kyi Win said that his written request to meet with Suu Kyi was rejected by the security forces on Monday.

"According to the correct procedure, I sent a written request to the Special Branch of Burma's police on December 3," Kyi Win said. "In the letter I requested a meeting with my client, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, over her pending case on December 9. However the Special Branch called me on December 8 and told me they could not permit me to meet with her."

Kyi Win said that it was imperative he meet with Suu Kyi to tell her that he has filed an appeal against her continued house arrest to the appeals court in Naypyidaw, the military junta's new capital.

The Rangoon lawyer said that, although he was denied, Suu Kyi's doctor, Tin Myo Win, was able to visit her at her lakeside residence on December 4 for about four hours.

Kyi Win insisted he would try again. "I will repeat my request for a meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to the appeals court," he said.

Kyi Win originally filed an appeal against Suu Kyi's continued house arrest to the appeals court in October. Prior to that, he said he had met with her five times to discuss the case.

After meeting with Suu Kyi in early September, Kyi Win said that the opposition leader had lost weight and was shunning her daily food deliveries until her right to receive personal mail, magazines and newspapers had been restored. At that time, visits by her doctor were also restricted.

The Burmese junta caved in to Suu Kyi's demands in mid-September. In return, the opposition leader agreed to accept deliveries of food and household supplies.

Since July 1989, pro-democracy icon Suu Kyi has been placed under house arrest or put in jail three times. She has spent 13 out of the past 19 years in detention.

[Nobel peace laureates speak out for Aung San Suu Kyi](#)

AFP - 11 December 2008

PARIS — Nobel peace laureates opened a summit in Paris Thursday to draw world attention to the plight of Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi, but former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was forced to miss the gathering.

Gorbachev, whose foundation is co-hosting the three-day gathering with the city of Paris, was suffering from ill health and unable to travel.

Meeting a day after former Finnish president Martii Ahtisaari received this year's prestigious prize, the dozen Nobel laureates were also to present an award to Irish rocker-turned-activist Bono for his crusade against poverty.

Gorbachev, 77, was to join former leaders F.W. de Klerk of South Africa, Lech Walesa of Poland and Northern Ireland politician John Hume for the annual gathering, held in Paris.

"I regret to inform you that doctors have forbidden me to travel," Gorbachev said in a message read to delegates. "I hope that everything will be all right."

Italian opposition leader Walter Veltroni described his health problem as "minor".

Gorbachev won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, a year after the Berlin Wall fell, marking a turning point in East-West relations that paved the way for the reunification of Germany.

The Paris summit focuses on the theme "human rights and a world without violence" amid celebrations marking 60 years since the UN declaration of human rights was adopted in Paris.

Nobel laureates are launching an international appeal to free Myanmar pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the prize in 1991, and has been detained for most of the past two decades.

Myanmar's military junta has kept her mostly isolated from the outside world, only receiving visits from her doctor and lawyer.

Last week, more than 100 former leaders wrote to UN chief Ban Ki-moon urging him to travel to Myanmar to secure the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners.

But the UN secretary general has ruled out a visit and expressed frustration at the military regime's failure to take steps toward dialogue with the opposition.

Ban visited Myanmar in May after its military rulers came under international fire for not allowing foreign aid in after a cyclone left 138,000 people dead or missing.

On Friday, the Nobel laureates are to pay tribute to Bono for his campaign to win debt relief for African countries and eradicating poverty.

Last year's recipients of the Peace Summit Award were US actors George Clooney and Don Cheadle, who have spoken out against the violence in Sudan's war-torn Darfur region.

[Myanmar releases opposition activist after 8 weeks](#)

Associated Press / IHT- Thursday, December 11, 2008

YANGON, Myanmar: Myanmar's military authorities freed a prominent member of the opposition National League for Democracy party Thursday after holding him for two months for questioning.

Party spokesman Nyan Win said that Ohn Kyaing, a 64-year-old former journalist, was well after being sent home from Yangon's notorious Insein prison.

He said Ohn Kyaing was asked about the party's cyclone relief effort and how it was funded, as well as other matters. He had been chairman of the party's relief committee set up after Cyclone Nargis devastated the country in May, killing more than 84,000 people and leaving another 54,000 missing.

"I am very happy that Ohn Kyaing was freed but it is very unfair that he was held in prison for such a long time without committing any crime," Nyan Win said.

Ohn Kyaing joined the party led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi after a long career in journalism and ran successfully for parliament in a 1990 general election.

The National League for Democracy came out first in the polls, but the ruling junta refused to honor the results and would not let Parliament convene. Instead they stepped up arrests and harassment of the opposition.

Suu Kyi, the party leader, has spent more than 13 of the past 19 years under house arrest.

Nyan Win said that since November more than 270 activists — more than half of them members of his party — have been given prison sentences ranging from two to 68 years.

Myanmar's military, which has held power since 1962, tolerates virtually no dissent. It has ramped up its crackdown on dissent since Buddhist monks led pro-democracy protests in September 2007.

According to international human rights groups the government holds more than 2,100 political prisoners, up sharply from nearly 1,200 in June 2007, before the demonstrations.

[Illegal Migrant Workers Arrested; Others Hide in Jungle](#)

Irrawaddy - Friday, December 12, 2008

By SAW YAN NAING

An estimated 100 Burmese illegal migrant workers in Mae Sot are being arrested daily by Thai authorities and hundreds have fled to hide in the jungle, according to a labor rights group in Mae Sot.

Mae Sot, a border town opposite Myawaddy, Burma, is home to an estimated 100,000 Burmese migrant workers, most of them illegal. About 40,000 are legally registered, according to the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association.

Moe Swe, the head of the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association, said between 100 and 150 Burmese migrant workers have been arrested each day since early December. Others have left the city to hide in the jungle, he said.

"They hide in the jungle for two or three days, and if the situation improves, they return to work," Moe Swe said. "If they hear that there will be a raid, they flee again

"Now, illegal migrant workers are not able to work everyday, and it is hard for them to make a living," he said.

Recently, about 3,000 Burmese workers were laid off due to the global financial crisis and an estimated 500 returned home, according to the labor rights group.

Many migrant workers only earn enough money to provide for their daily food. If they are arrested and sent back to Burma, they usually re-enter Thailand.

Thai authorities regularly launch crackdowns on illegal migrant workers in Mae Sot at the end of each year.

There are about 1.5 million legal and illegal Burmese migrant workers in Thailand.

[Ashin Gambira awarded honorary citizenship by Italy](#) *Mizzima - Friday, 12 December 2008 13:16 by Zarni*

Chiang Mai – Ashin Gambira, sentenced to a lengthy prison term for galvanizing the monk community into staging protests in Burma last September, was awarded the 'honorary citizenship' by 'Morbegno' city, Italy.

The award came on December 10 the international human rights day, for his selfless sacrifice made during the saffron revolution for the sake of the people and the country.

"The people of Morbegno city stand by Ashin Gambira, who led the peaceful protest during the saffron revolution," said the website of this city in northern Italy.

The website also said that the city will welcome Ashin Gambira if he wishes to visit after being released from prison.

The award was received by U Uttara, Chairman of Sasana Moli and abbot of London Sasanayanthi Vihara monastery on behalf of Ashin Gambira.

Ashin Gambira was previously awarded the 'Freedom of Expression 2008' prize given by 'Index of Censorship' and the Abbot U Yewata Memorial Peace prize.

After the saffron revolution, he was arrested while he was on the run, and later sentenced to 68 years in prison last month and sent away to the remote Khamti prison in Sagaing Division.

Similarly Shan ethnic leader and leader of 'Shan Nationality League for Democracy' (SNLD), U Khun Tun Oo, was awarded the 'Honourary Italian citizen' by Italy, 'Shan Herald News Agency' said. He was sentenced to a ludicrous 93 years in prison.

The award given by Monza mayor was received by U Bawdi Zaw Min, an associated director of EU-Burma Bureau on December 9 on behalf of this ethnic Shan leader who is serving his prison sentence in remote Puta-O prison in Kachin State.

[Unhappy Human Rights Day in Burma](#)

UPI Asia - December 11, 2008

By Awzar Thi - Column: Rule of Lords

Hong Kong, China — While governments and groups around the world made effusive statements and gave awards to mark the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on Dec. 10, the Asian Human Rights Commission struck a more somber note.

“The celebration,” the regional body said, “is a grim reminder that even after 60 years of the adoption of this great declaration, the gap between what is declared and what is actually achieved ... is enormous. Both in the field of civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights, people in Asia ... have so little to celebrate.”

The downbeat mood was certainly shared in Burma. There, a handful of people belonging to local group Human Rights Defenders and Promoters gathered in Rangoon to mark the date.

Their International Human Rights Day event was muted by comparison to most around the world, and even compared to the one that they had held the year before. But that they got together at all demonstrated their commitment to what the day represents.

Government-backed thugs and officials harassed and questioned the participants as they arrived for the program on Tuesday. The following morning, police and other authorities visited and threatened the organizers.

“They seemed quite angry,” one told Radio Free Asia. “Every year you lot upset the public like this,’ they said.”

For upsetting the public with talk about human rights, dozens of the group’s members are already languishing in jail. They include its leader, who has been accused of plotting bomb attacks after he spoke out on the need for more emergency relief in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, which hit the country in May. Others have been imprisoned on offences ranging from sedition to illegal tutoring. Many were arbitrarily detained and charged after last year’s protests.

Police have lodged the name of an associate living abroad with Interpol, which has obligingly posted a wanted notice for him on its Web site. His alleged offences include people smuggling and terrorism.

The gap between what has been declared and what has been achieved could hardly be wider than in Burma today, a fact that Human Rights Defenders and Promoters also plainly acknowledge.

“In stark contrast to the aims and pledges contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, our country, Burma,” its statement read, “is utterly violating human rights in the gravest manner.”

One person who had come from cyclone-ravaged areas to attend the gathering put it more bluntly: “Across the whole country, you’ll see human rights abuses whenever you step outside your house.”

After a tumultuous year in which global interest in Burma was not matched with efforts to support domestic efforts for real change, the group's statement also contained a sense of despair at the ineffectual work of international agencies.

"Contrary to their aims and objectives, the U.N. and the Human Rights Council as well have failed to successfully prevent human rights abuses," it said pointedly.

Nothing in this year's speeches of either the U.N. secretary-general or the high commissioner for human rights will give the rights defenders in Burma, or elsewhere in Asia, cause for optimism.

In her address, High Commissioner Navanethem Pillay blandly iterated, "Tens of millions of people around the world are still unaware that they have rights that they can demand." She said that she warmly welcomed the designation of 2009 as the International Year of Human Rights Learning, to make up for this presumed deficit in knowledge.

For millions in Burma and Asia, the declared year will consist of nothing more than lost time and wasted opportunities. As Human Rights Defenders and Promoters make clear, their problem is not a lack of knowledge. They understand the issues better than the high commissioner. Their problem is a lack of means to implement and enforce their rights.

Nobody needs to be told about rights that they can't obtain. What people need are practical ways to protect those rights, and to obtain redress where they are wronged. Learning about human rights is only useful if accompanied with well-informed steps toward those ends.

The United Nations should instead do some learning itself. It should spend time learning about how rights are systemically denied in countries across Asia, including Burma, and about what can be done to intervene actively to make it otherwise. This is a much harder task than the one it has set itself for 2009, but it's the only one really worth doing.

"Unfortunately, in the countries of the region the ordinary folk react to human rights discourse without much enthusiasm," the Asian Human Rights Commission said in its closing remarks on Wednesday, "due to their realization that the systems of oppression that exist, which are defective administration of justice systems, will not allow them to enjoy these rights."

That's the nub of Burma's problems. The Human Rights Defenders and Promoters know it. Anyone who steps outside their door there knows it. The U.N. technocrats probably know it too, even if they won't admit it. Enough of learning; without implementing, there will only be many more unhappy Human Rights Days to observe in Rangoon.

([Awzar Thi](#) is the pen name of a member of the Asian Human Rights Commission with over 15 years of experience as an advocate of human rights and the rule of law in Thailand and Burma. His Rule of Lords blog can be read at <http://ratchasima.net>)

[Is UWSA Preparing for Clash with Junta?](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 11, 2008

By LAWI WENG

About 1,000 United Wa State Army (UWSA) troops have been taking part in military training exercises near the Thai-Burmese border since the beginning of December, as Burma's ruling junta steps up its efforts to force the former rebel army to disarm.

The military exercises, which are taking place just a few kilometers from Mae Ai District in northern Thailand's Chiang Mai Province, come after another failed attempt by the Burmese Army to persuade the Wa army to disarm, according to Khuensai Jaiyen, editor of the *Shan Herald Agency for News*, based in Chiang Mai.

Khuensai said that Maj-Gen Kyaw Phyoe, the Burmese Army's regional commander in the Golden Triangle area of Shan State, met with the commander of the UWSA's 468th Brigade, Col Sai Hsarm, in Mongpawk, south of the UWSA headquarters of Panghsang, on December 5 to pressure him to withdraw troops from the area and "exchange arms for peace."

A source close to the UWSA said that Wa leaders rejected Kyaw Phyoe's proposal, and the meeting ended abruptly without the two sides reaching an agreement.

"The UWSA military training may be in preparation for an attack on the Burmese Army if they continue to pressure them to move from their current location on the Thai-Burmese border," said Khuensai.

Tensions between the Burmese Army and the UWSA have been mounting since the Wa were told last year to withdraw their troops to Panghsang, which is located near the Chinese border, from their current position near the Thai-Burmese border. The UWSA continues to ignore the order.

The military exercises recently launched by the UWSA and mortar shelling and gunfire in the area have put Thai border forces on the alert, according a source based in the area.

Aung Kyaw Zwa, a Burmese analyst based on the Sino-Burmese border, told *The Irrawaddy* on Thursday that the UWSA's current military exercises are in preparation for a clash with government troops sometime next year.

"The UWSA know they have to talk to the Burmese military soon," he said. "These exercises are intended to reinforce their position before the talks."

The UWSA is an armed ethnic group that has had a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military since the early 1990's. Leaders of the group, including its commander Wei Hsueh Kang, also known as Wei Xuegang, are wanted by the US government for their key role in the region's drug trade.

NEWS ANALYSIS: Junta Demand for Higher Rice Production Derided

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 11, 2008

By WILLIAM BOOT

BANGKOK — The Burmese junta's call for greater rice production for export using labor drawn from returning jobless migrant workers has been met with derision by aid workers and long-time Burma watchers.

Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein last week produced statistics that could not be verified for the country's rice production and insisted that rice farmers must work harder to raise exports.

"Although Myanmar's [Burma's] rice production has increased, it can be found that she has not been capable of producing more rice than the nations that are smaller and have [less] farmland than Myanmar," Thein Sein was quoted in the government newspaper as saying. "Myanmar is to strive for ensuring local self-sufficiency in rice and [exports] about 3 million tons of rice annually," he said.

What he did not say is that Burma's main rice-growing region and its population are still struggling to recover from the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis last May.

"One could point the PM to Burma's collapsed rural infrastructure, villages without viable roads connecting them to markets, fertilizer that's unavailable at a viable price, irrigation systems that have silted up, the fact that new variety seeds, pesticides, pumps, ploughs and other equipment is out of reach—and that's before Nargis," said Sean Turnell, professor of economics at Australia's Macquarie University and longtime Burma economy watcher.

Turnell, who also produces *Burma Economic Watch*, told *The Irrawaddy* that Nargis caused immense damage which is still impeding a return to anything like normal rice production in the main Irrawaddy delta growing region, causing "massive loss of farm animals, dykes destroyed, fields in some of the most productive areas inundated for a while with seawater, death and labor shortages, and a government that turns grant-in-aid into loans."

Thein Sein said the labor shortage is easily solved by putting to work in the paddies returning Burmese made jobless abroad in recent weeks by the global economic crisis.

Although the junta claims the Irrawaddy delta and other hard-hit cyclone areas are in a phase of "reconstruction," the inhabitants of the region are still struggling to survive and are dependent on aid from organizations including Médecins sans Frontières, Save the Children and the UN World Food Program.

A spokesman for the UN in Rangoon, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the relief efforts have been inadequate and that the work of rebuilding is still in its infancy. According to a UN press release on Thursday, agriculture and early recovery sectors are lagging with currently only 25 percent and 39 percent of needs met respectively.

Burmese Agricultural Ministry has estimated the cost of rehabilitating the delta's rice fields alone could exceed US \$240 million, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization said.

Burma's fragile economy is more than 50 percent dependent on agriculture, and approximately two-thirds of that is generated by the wrecked Irrawaddy delta region.

The country's road network, in a state of disrepair long before the cataclysm of Nargis, has proved a hindrance and has delayed the arrival of supplies while much-needed fertilizer is, and has been for a long time, virtually non-existent. Sources in the region point out that corruption and mismanagement are also hindering the relief efforts.

Food shortages, and the desperate search for sustenance, prevent many farmers from properly rebuilding their homes, while finding clean drinking water is still a problem with many wells and other sources still in a state of contamination. In Pyapon District, aid workers have reported that vast swathes of farmland are still a long way from being ready for cultivation and that up to half the villagers are unemployed and without either cattle or seed.

In fact, the last thing the area needs is an influx of manpower, and human muscle, despite Thein Sein's grandiose words, just isn't enough—the regeneration process requires tractors, power tillers and cattle, all of which are in desperately short supply. The lack of diesel fuel is another serious problem, despite the increasing quantities being smuggled in from Bangladesh.

The regime recently announced that 5,000 power tillers have been distributed, but their whereabouts remain a mystery—sources report that very few new machines have been seen in the area, and the ones that have arrived are unfamiliar and all-but useless to their new owners: the majority of Burma's farmers, having had negligible access to money for modern farming technology and equipment.

Turnell says Burma's rural credit system is completely moribund—undermining the ability of Burma's farmers to buy equipment that they need.

"Less than 5 percent of the population has access to formal credit of any kind—the remainder get none at all, or rely on moneylenders who charge usurious interest rates that eliminate any profits," Turnell told *The Irrawaddy* on Wednesday.

For a period leading up to World War II, Burma was the world's largest exporter of rice. In the past four decades, since the country has been under military rule, Burma has seen its rice exports drop from nearly 4 million tonnes per year to an unverified figure of 600,000 tonnes quoted by the junta.

[U.S. to provide \\$5 mln more for Myanmar relief aid](#)

Reuters - Wed Dec 10, 2008 8:32pm EST

By Jeremy Pelofsky

WASHINGTON - Some U.S. aid is getting to the people of Myanmar and Washington plans to provide \$5 million more in disaster relief in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis that devastated the country in May, U.S. first lady Laura Bush said on Wednesday.

The United States sent about \$75 million in relief and the reclusive military junta in Myanmar allowed at least 100 U.S. flights after the storm slammed the Irrawaddy delta, killing more than 130,000 and leaving more than 2 million destitute.

Bush, speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York to mark the 60th anniversary of the International Declaration of Human Rights, said the U.S. Agency for International Development would send \$5 million more in aid.

"This assistance will support the efforts of nongovernmental organizations like the World Food Program and Save the Children to ensure access to clean water, adequate shelter, basic health services, and other essential needs in the most affected areas," she said.

She noted that a reporter from the BBC went to the delta recently and made an interesting discovery.

"We saw photographs of the shacks that the people who lived in the delta are building -- rebuilding to rebuild their homes, and they were built out of the rice sacks that were stacked with USAID and American flags," she said.

"So we do know that some of this relief we're sending into the cyclone area is getting to the people," Bush said.

Just a few weeks before she and her husband, President George W. Bush, leave the White House, Bush pledged she would keep pushing for democratic reforms in Myanmar, previously known as Burma, after leaving Washington.

"I'm going to pay, really, a lot of attention to these two issues, the international issues that I've worked on the most, both Afghanistan and Burma," she said.

Myanmar's military junta has refused to accept losing a 1990 election and has cracked down numerous times on pro-democracy demonstrators, killing thousands. (Reporting by Jeremy Pelofsky; Editing by Peter Cooney)

[UN urges help for 6 million in long-term limbo](#)

AP – 10 December 2008

By FRANK JORDANS

GENEVA - The U.N. refugee chief urged countries Wednesday to help some 6 million people around the world living in long-term limbo, unable to return to the country from which they fled or integrate properly into the society in which they live.

Antonio Guterres said the rich world should do more for developing countries struggling to cope with 30 protracted refugee situations — from hundreds of thousands of Afghans still stranded in Pakistan and Iran, to Burmese refugees who have now been living 16 years in Bangladesh.

"The international community has not done enough to share that burden," Guterres, the U.N. high commissioner for refugees, told U.N. members in Geneva.

Long-term refugees — those with that status for at least five years — face particular hardship when their position at the lowest end of society becomes cemented, he said. Strained relations with the hosts, disputes over scarce resources such as water and work, and crime resulting from poverty can result.

"It is neither realistic nor fair to leave the resolution of a refugee situation to the host state alone," Guterres said.

He said some refugees can be carefully returned home, when security and adequate permits. Others should be granted citizenship in their host countries or offered new homes elsewhere, he added.

Guterres, speaking at a two-day meeting on refugees, praised Tanzania for taking in hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing civil war in neighboring Burundi in 1972. The African country naturalized most of the refugees from the period, but has since found itself dealing with further waves of refugees from Burundi and Rwanda.

Mizengo Peter Pinda, Tanzania's prime minister, told the meeting his country fears it will have to deal with even more refugees from eastern Congo soon unless the international community finds a way of stopping the fighting there.

UNHCR said separately that it has received about a quarter of the \$1.86 billion budget it is seeking for its refugee work next year. The United States alone contributed \$125 million of the \$463 million pledged so far.

"This is an encouraging outcome at a time when donors are faced by the uncertainties provoked by the current economic turbulence," Guterres said.

He asked donors to come up with further funds in the new year.

Myanmar at centre of elephant smuggling trade: report

AFP - December 10, 2008

BANGKOK— Myanmar is at the centre of an illegal trade in elephants and ivory, with more than 250 live animals smuggled out of the country in the past decade, a report said Wednesday.

Most of the elephants were destined for use in the tourist trekking industry in neighbouring Thailand, said the report by the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC.

Smuggling of live elephants and ivory is in "blatant contravention" of national laws and of the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), the group said.

"Our research found evidence of corruption allowing the illicit smuggling of ivory and elephants to take place," Chris Shepherd, senior programme officer with TRAFFIC, was quoted as saying in a statement.

"Females and juvenile elephants are particularly targeted to supply the demand from the tourism industry in Thailand, where they are put to work in elephant trekking centres," said Shepherd.

Smugglers took elephants over the frontier by bribing border officials, the report said, citing one guard as saying he had charged up to 200 dollars per animal because he was saving up to fly to Germany for the 2006 World Cup.

Yet no cross-border trade of live elephants had been reported to CITES by either Myanmar or Thailand, and some traders said elephants had disappeared from parts of Myanmar owing to numbers captured for the live trade, it said.

A survey by the group of 14 markets and three border markets in Thailand and China, which both adjoin Myanmar, also found 9,000 pieces of ivory and 16 whole tusks for sale, it said.

Reports of elephant disappearances and the amount of ivory on sale "suggests that trade poses a significant threat to the survival of Asian elephants in Myanmar," said Vincent Nijman, a co-author of the report.

Myanmar has the largest elephant population in Southeast Asia, with an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 animals, the report said.

TRAFFIC and conservation group WWF called on authorities in Myanmar to work closely with enforcement officers in Thailand and China to address the illegal trade.

"Both Thailand and China must do much more to increase enforcement and crack down on this insidious trade," Susan Lieberman, director of the WWF international species programme, was quoted as saying in the TRAFFIC statement.

It called for greater monitoring of domestic elephant populations in Myanmar, including the use of microchip and tattoo-based identification systems to prevent illegal cross-border movement.

Junta Has Crushed Peaceful Dissent: Laura Bush

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 11, 2008

By LALIT K JHA

NEW YORK — Praising the courage of the people of Burma for standing up to the barbaric rule of the country's junta, US first lady Laura Bush said on Wednesday that the Burmese military regime has crushed peaceful dissent for decades.

"Children are conscripted as soldiers, and families are forced to perform life-threatening labor," Bush told a select audience at the Council on Foreign Relations, a New York-based think tank, speaking on the occasion of Human Rights Day.

Bush, who has taken a personal interest in the plight of Burma, has been instrumental in shaping US policy on the country during her eight years in the White House. She has spent a significant amount of time talking about the country, its people and the brutality of its military rulers.

"The women of Burma have responded to this brutality with inspiring courage," she said, adding that she herself has been inspired by the leadership and courage of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Referring to her frequent interaction with Burmese, Bush recalled her visit to the Thai-Burmese border in August, where she met Dr Cynthia Maung, who operates the Mae Tao clinic.

Hundreds of patients pass through the clinic's doors every day. Most are migrant workers or refugees from Burma, while many others make the dangerous cross-border journey to Thailand because they have no access to health care in Burma.

"At Dr Cynthia's clinic, I saw an American doctor performing eye surgery removing cataracts, which let people who had had these very severe cataracts see again for the first time, and it was a really—it was a thrill to get to see that. And also I saw victims of land mines waiting for treatment in the clinic," she said.

Dr Cynthia left Burma in 1988, joining thousands of others who fled to Thailand following the military's crackdown on a nationwide pro-democracy uprising. She crossed the border and opened the clinic expecting to be there for a few months, but 20 years later, she's still there.

"The ruling junta has labeled Dr Cynthia an insurgent and an opium-smuggling terrorist. But she continues her work to give the people of Burma the care their government denies them," Bush said.

Observing that a single voice can be a great weapon against a regime that denies basic human rights, Bush said in April she presented the Vital Voices Human Rights Global Leadership Award to Charm Tong.

At the age of 17, Charm Tong stood before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to describe the military campaign being carried out against women in Burma's Shan State.

"She spoke unflinchingly of rape and abuse, though her audience included representatives of the regime she condemned. Charm Tong continues to speak out about the regime's abuses, and she ministers to the needs of those who have fled Burma," the first lady said.

Bush also recounted the heroism of another Burmese woman, Su Su Nway, who defied junta representatives who tried to force her and her fellow villagers to repair a road.

"She brought the local officials to court under a law prohibiting forced labor—and she won. But the government filed a complaint against Su Su Nway for 'insulting and disrupting a government official on duty.' This labor activist was sentenced to 18 months in jail. She was released in June 2006 and then returned immediately to advocate for human rights. Then she was arrested in ... November 2007 after posting fliers near a UN official's hotel. She has since been sentenced to 12 years."

Bush said all these female dissidents were following in the footsteps of Aung San Suu Kyi, the world's only detained Nobel Peace Prize winner.

As leader of the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung San Suu Kyi has spent most of the past two decades under house arrest. The NLD won the last nationwide election in 1990, but has never been permitted to take power.

"Her example of strength has earned support from around the world, including from here in the United States," Bush said, recalling bipartisan expressions of solidarity for the detained democracy icon in the US Senate.

Bush also took aim at Snr-Gen Than Shwe, who heads the Burmese junta, for his ongoing campaign to silence opponents of the regime ahead of planned elections in 2010, despite promises of working toward a democratic transition for his country.

"Since the Saffron Revolution of 2007, the number of political prisoners in Burma has increased from around 1,100 to more than 2,100 now. Female activist Nilar Thein was forced to leave her newborn child and flee into hiding. After a year on the run, she was captured and jailed this September. Her husband is also imprisoned," Bush said.

The first lady said the Burmese military junta has repeatedly ignored calls from the international community to end its repression, and is instead going ahead with its own agenda.

Bush also announced another \$5 million in disaster assistance funds to communities devastated by Cyclone Nargis.

"This assistance will support the efforts of non-governmental organizations like the World Food Program and Save the Children to ensure access to clean water, adequate shelter, basic health services, and other essential needs in the most affected areas," she said.

[Detained leader Min Ko Naing freezing in prison, needs eye care: Sister](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 10 December 2008 18:31

by Mungpi - New Delhi - Detained student leader Min Ko Naing, recently sentenced to 65 years in prison, is suffering from a severe eye ailment and is in need of immediate attention of an eye specialist, his sister, who visited him at Keng Tung prison in Shan state, said.

His sister Kyi Kyi Nyunt, who visited the prominent student leader on Thursday, said Min Ko Naing is in solitary confinement in the Keng Tung prison. He is suffering from an eye problem and his condition is deteriorating. He needs the attention of an eye specialist.

"We have requested the prison authorities to allow him a check-up and medical attention by an eye specialist," Kyi Kyi Nyunt told Mizzima over telephone, adding that the student leader has been suffering from the eye ailment since his detention in Rangoon's Insein prison.

Kyi Kyi Nyunt said that Min Ko Naing is kept in a separate cell all by himself and though the prison situation seems normal, the severe weather in Keng Tung is having an adverse affect on his health.

"It is like keeping him in a refrigerator," said Kyi Kyi Nyunt, adding that she had requested the prison authorities to allow him to walk around and be in the sun occasionally because he seems to be having difficulty in moving his hands and feet due to the severe cold.

Prominent student leaders Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, who were arrested in mid-August 2007, after leading a peaceful march in Rangoon for a roll back of fuel prices which had pushed up costs of essential commodities, were shifted to Keng Tung prison last month after being handed lengthy prison terms of 65 years.

But after spending about two nights in Keng Tung prison, Ko Ko Gyi was transferred to Mai Sat prison in Shan State, she added.

Burma's military rulers over the past few months have handed down lengthy prison terms to political activists and begun transferring them to far-flung prisons across the country, making it all the more difficult for family members to visit them.

"The prison authorities said, we could meet him [Min Ko Naing] once in two weeks. But I don't think we can go that often because it is too far away. We might only be able to visit him once in a few months," said Kyi Kyi Nyunt, who returned to Rangoon on Tuesday evening from Keng Tung.

In much the same way, other prominent political activists including comedian Zargarnar and blogger Nay Phone Latt were all transferred to remote prisons across Burma. Zargarnar has been transferred to a prison in the northern most city of Myitkyina of Kachin state, while popular rapper Zeya Thaw was moved to a prison in Burma's southern most town of Kawthawng.

[Russian business presence becoming stronger in Burma](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 10 December 2008 19:22

by Moe Thu - Rangoon - With several Russian firms directly investing or having businesses interests in Burma and with the closer cooperation between the two countries, a Rangoon based observer said, Russia is likely to emerge as a major investor in the near future in the Southeast Asian country.

The observer, who closely follows Russian-Burmese relationship, said since about eight years ago Russia's private and public enterprises slowly emerged in Burma and began investing and operating businesses in sectors including gold and copper mining, onshore-offshore oil and gas explorations, steel manufacturing and even had a finger in garment and the fisheries industries.

Of the many businesses ventures in cooperation with Russian enterprises are the prominent Russian Oil and Natural Gas Company Silver Wave Sputnik Petroleum Pte Ltd., Victorious Glory International Pte Ltd., and Technoprom Exports of Russia.

Russia's Oil and Natural Gas companies had conducted two onshore and two offshore projects, with each project estimated to be valued at between US\$ 30 million to US\$50 million, the observer, who declined to reveal his identity for fear of reprisal told Mizzima.

"As a principle, the military government [of Burma] does not allow any foreign company to be involved in onshore exploration and production. But the Russian case is an exception," the observer said.

Another important project the US\$160 million development of a steel manufacturing facility by 'Technoprom Exports' of Russia is also nearly complete in southern Shan State.

According to the observer, the project, which has a capacity of producing 200,000 tonnes of cast iron per annum, is expected to be commissioned in early 2009 and that the iron produced would be fed to a steel mill run by the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), a major business undertaking of the army based in Myingyan of Mandalay Division.

The facility located in the town of Pingpet in southern Shan State, will have a commercial-scale coal-powered generator that produces 65 megawatt of electricity. The coal will be transported to the plant from Tigyit coal mine, Burma's biggest coal mine located in Tigyit village of Pinlong Township, about 22 miles south of Kalaw town in Southern Shan State.

The observer said Russia is likely to emerge as a major investor in Burma, because it is one of the foremost world powers. Burma's military rulers are seeking stronger support by giving them secret business deals in the country.

While Burma has publicly declared that it maintains a policy of non-alignment, it is apparent that Burma needs an alliance with some major power like Russia, in order to survive in the long run in the international arena, he added.

Meanwhile, another informed industrial source claims that a Russian firm is now seeking business deals in Burma's garment and fisheries industries. "A Russian firm, yet be identified, plans to set up and run a garment factory in Rangoon, that will manufacture bullet-proof jackets," the source said. However, the information could be independently verified.

[Myanmar puts off again opening of second border trade zone](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-10 19:33:28

YANGON -- Myanmar has put off again the opening of a new border trade zone, which is opposite to Thailand, for the third time due to the current situation in the southeast Asian neighbor, the local weekly 7-Day News journal reported Wednesday without a new date set for move.

The formal inauguration of the Myawaddy border zone, the second largest of its kind in Myanmar after the Muse 105th Mile Border Trade Zone with China, was first scheduled for March this year but was reset for Dec. 7 for the second time.

Despite postponement, border trade between Myanmar and Thailand are operating normally, the report said.

The 193-hectare Myawaddy trade zone in southeastern Kayin state bordering Thailand's Maesot, which is to highlight export of Myanmar marine products, was constructed by three Myanmar companies since 2007, the report added.

Besides Myawaddy, Myanmar also trades with Thailand at Tachilek, Kawthoung and Meik (Free on Board) under the border trade system.

According to official statistics, in the fiscal year of 2007-08 which ended in March, Myanmar-Thai bilateral trade reached 3.205 billion U.S. dollars, of which Myanmar's export to Thailand took 2.823 billion dollars, while its import from Thailand accounted for 382 million dollars.

Under a latest proposal of Thailand to Myanmar's largest business organization of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI), a prospective Phaya Thonzu border trade zone in Mon state's Thanphyuzayat township connecting Thailand's Kanchanaburi province will be established as another one of its kind after Myawaddy's.

Meanwhile, the State Customs Department's figures indicate that Myanmar's total foreign trade volume in 2007-08 stood 8.851 billion dollars, a new high against 2006-07's 8.1 billion dollars.

Of the total, the exports took 6.043 billion, while the imports accounted for 2.818 billion dollars registering a trade surplus of 3.225 billion dollars.

Myanmar main export goods are natural gas, agricultural, marine and forestry products, while its key import goods are machinery, crude oil, edible oil, pharmaceutical products, cement, fertilizer and consumers goods.

[India allows limited wheat exports to Myanmar, Nepal](#)

Reuters India, Thu Dec 11, 2008 10:56am IST

NEW DELHI - India has given permission for limited wheat exports to neighbours Myanmar and Nepal, the government said in a statement on Thursday.

It allowed the shipment of 950 tonnes to Myanmar, and 10,000 tonnes to Nepal.

Last month, Farm Minister Sharad Pawar said India would set aside 2 million tonnes of wheat to meet requests made through diplomatic channels, partially easing the country's export ban.

(Reporting by Biman Mukherji, Editing by Mark Williams)

[Burma's Nuclear Temptation – by Bertil Lintner](#)

YaleGlobal Dec 10, 2008

Rich with uranium and desperate for control, the Burmese junta may find a nuclear option attractive

CHIANG MAI: Over the past year, Southeast Asia's diplomatic community has tried to sort fact from fiction in a stream of unconfirmed reports from Burma, the region's most isolated and secretive country. Burma's fledgling nuclear program with Russian assistance and its mysterious connections with North Korea raise concern in the region about its purpose.

According to Burmese exiles in Thailand, the Russians and North Koreans assist the Burmese in developing nuclear capability. But wary of similar reports by Iraqi exiles a few years ago, which turned out to be false, the international community remains skeptical. In a research paper for Griffith University, for example, Australian scholar Andrew Selth, dismisses the reports.

Nevertheless, certain facts are not in doubt. Burma first initiated a nuclear research program as early as 1956, when its then-democratic government set up the Union of Burma Atomic Energy Center, UBAEC, in then-capital Rangoon. Unrelated to the country's defense industries, it came to a halt when the military seized power in 1962. New power-holders, led by General Ne Win did not trust UBAEC head Hla Nyunt.

In February 2001, Burma's present junta, the State Peace and Development Council decided to revitalize the country's nuclear program, and Russia's Atomic Energy Ministry announced plans to build a 10-

megawatt nuclear research reactor in central Burma. In July 2001, Burma established a Department of Atomic Energy, believed to be the brainchild of the Minister of Science and Technology, U Thaung, a graduate of Burma's Defense Services Academy and former ambassador to the United States. US-trained nuclear scientist Thein Po Saw was identified as a leading advocate for nuclear technology in Burma.

At a press conference in Rangoon on January 21, 2002, Vice-Chief of Military Intelligence Major-General Kyaw Win issued a statement: "Myanmar's consideration of building a nuclear research reactor is based on the peaceful purposes getting modern technologies needed for the country, availability of radioisotopes being used peacefully, training technicians and performing feasibility study for generation of electricity from nuclear power."

While Burma suffers from chronic power shortages, the need for a research reactor, used mainly for medical purposes, is unclear. Radioisotopes allow imaging of the brain, bones, organs, lungs and blood flow, advanced technology for Burma's basic health services.

However, observers pointed out the Russian-made nuclear-research reactor that the Burmese authorities sought to acquire is similar to the 5-megawatt research reactor that the then-Soviet Union installed at Yongbyon in North Korea in 1965, from which North Korea later extracted plutonium for a nuclear device. Burma's military leaders couldn't help but notice how North Korea stood up to the US, a harsh critic of the Burmese regime, mainly due to its nuclear program.

Reports have been murky since. In April 2007, days after the restoration of diplomatic ties between Burma and North Korea – broken since North Koreans detonated a bomb in Rangoon in 1983 – a North Korean freighter, the Kang Nam I, docked at Thilawa port. Burmese officials claimed that the ship sought shelter from a storm. But two Burmese reporters working for a Japanese news agency were briefly detained when they went to the port to investigate, indicating possible other, more secret reasons for the visit.

According to the July 2007 issue of the Irrawaddy, a Thailand-based publication by Burmese exiles: "by a strange coincidence, the 2,900-ton North Korean cargo vessel MV Bong Hoafan...sought shelter from a storm and anchored at a Burmese port last November. The Burmese government reported that an on-board inspection had 'found no suspicious material or military equipment.' But journalists and embassies in Rangoon remained skeptical."

At about the same time, the South Korean news agency Yonhap reported "a North Korean ship under US surveillance was believed to have unloaded self-propelled artillery at a Myanmar port."

The deal with Russia was stalled for several years, but in May 2007, Russia's atomic energy agency, Rosatom, announced construction of the nuclear-research reactor. According to Rosatom, the reactor would use low-enriched uranium, not plutonium. Up to 350 Burmese nationals, most military personnel, already trained in Russia under the initial 2001 agreement, and since then several hundred more trained at Russian institutions.

Signatories of the agreement reached in Moscow on May 15, 2007 were U Thaung and Rosatom head Sergey Kiriyyenko. According to Rosatom's press release: "The sides have agreed to cooperate on the establishment of a center for nuclear studies in the territory of Myanmar (the general contractor will be Atomstroyexport). The center will comprise a 10-megawatt light water reactor working on 20 per cent-enriched uranium-235, an activation analysis laboratory, a medical isotope production laboratory, silicon doping system, nuclear waste treatment and burial facilities. The center will be controlled by IAEA."

Despite that claim, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported on May 17, 2007, that Burma had not reported plans to build a nuclear reactor. As a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Burma is required to allow inspections of any nuclear facilities.

The agreement does not mention North Korea, but in November 2003 the Norway-based broadcasting station Democratic Voice of Burma, run by Burmese exiles, reported that 80 Burmese military personnel had departed for North Korea to study "nuclear and atomic energy technology."

The report remains unconfirmed, its source unclear. If Burmese military personnel traveled to North Korea, it's more likely for training in maintenance of missiles, which Burma then wanted to buy from North Korea but could not yet afford.

Alarm bells rang in August 2008, after India withdrew permission for a North Korean plane to overfly its airspace on route to Iran, just before taking off from Mandalay in Burma where it had made a stopover. The Ilyushin-62 carried unidentified cargo, and its destination after the stopover was unclear.

Reports of some cooperation between Burma, Russia, North Korea and Iran have also come from two Burmese nationals, an army officer and a scientist, who recently left the country. According to them, a Russian-supplied 10-megawatt research reactor is being built, at Myaing, north of Pakokku, said to be for peaceful research. But according to the defectors, another facility exists south of the old hill station of Myin Oo Lwin, formerly known as Maymyo. Three Russians supposedly work there while a group of North Koreans are said to engage in tunneling and constructing a water-cooling system. The defectors also assert that in 2007 an Iranian intelligence officer, identified only as "Mushavi," visited Burma. Apart from sharing nuclear knowledge, he reportedly provided advice on missile systems using computer components from Milan.

Burma has uranium deposits, and the Ministry of Energy has identified five sources of ore in the country, all low-grade uranium unsuitable for military purposes. But the defectors claim that two more uranium mines in Burma are not included in official reports: one near Mohnyin in Kachin State and another in the vicinity of Mogok in Mandalay Division. The ore is supposedly transported to a Thabeikkyin refinery, conveniently located between the two alleged mines.

Until such reports can be verified, or refuted, speculations remain. But a nuclear-powered Burma would be a nightmare for all neighbors and would upset the balance of power in the region. All that is certain is that Burma has a nuclear program. It may be years, if not decades, away from developing nuclear-weapons capability. But the fact that the country's military leadership experiments with nuclear power is cause for concern.

Bertil Lintner is a Swedish journalist based in Thailand and the author of several works on Asia, including "Blood Brothers: The Criminal Underworld of Asia" and "Great Leader, Dear Leader: Demystifying North Korea under the Kim Clan."

[Has international diplomacy on Burma touched its zenith? Commentary by Dr. Sein Myint Mizzima - Wednesday, 10 December 2008 13:07](#)

The 241 members of Asean Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) called on the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to visit Burma and press for the release of political prisoners and kick start political reforms, after his refusal to a similar petition made by 112 former Presidents and Prime Ministers to him.

Instead, the UN Chief said "his direct involvement was "not enough" to resolve the current political stalemate in Burma" and redirected the onus to the Group of Friends on Burma 'to use their influence, available leverage and tools" to mount pressure on the Burmese military leaders. Most particularly, of her immediate neighbours China, India and Thailand.

Has international diplomacy on Burma reached its zenith? Or to put it more bluntly, has the UN's shuttle diplomacy arrived at a dead-end? Depending on one's perspectives on UN effectiveness and role, some might say 'aye' and some might say 'nay'.

The 'nayes' would say that the ultimate authority of the UN lies with its Security Council that could still adopt a binding resolution on Burma if there are 'No' veto from five permanent member 'PM' states. However, the 'ayers' would argue that this is unlikely to happen, especially the two PMs, i.e. the Chinese and the Russians, allies of the Burmese junta, will not allow passage of any resolution on Burma initiated and proposed by the US and her Western allies under the current geo-political circumstances.

And many past and present world conflicts that UN has failed to prevent and act on, perhaps for many reasons, attest and add strong support to the pessimistic 'ayers' on UN ineffectiveness. However, the optimist 'nayes' would cast a long shadow based on the 'dynamic' nature of politics, that eventual possibility

of international consensus is still likely to obtain if the global polarization can be reduced dramatically resultant of the incoming US new administration.

But, as one former diplomat pointed out that the 'good offices' of the UN Secretary General provided services as mandated by the General Assembly but is under no instruction from the Security Council. Without any resolution from the Security Council, the UN SG has no power to act and enforce upon any member state.

It is evident that the ruling military government in Burma was determined and carefully planning to control political power in the country for a long time. Starting from the secretive construction of the new capital in the jungle years before to the recent long prison sentencing of political opposition activists and potential dissidents, clearly demonstrated their preparedness to face any internal or external pressure exerted on them.

The recent discovery of natural energy resources help the Generals to cultivate closer economic relationships with willing and eager energy starved neighbours, effectively breaking those selective economic sanctions imposed by the US and the West. Furthermore, deepening polarization between the West and Russians helps provide the shrewd military generals opportunity to exploit the geopolitics to their advantage, able to block any proposed and intended resolution initiated by the US and her allies at the UNSC.

Such ineffectiveness and powerlessness of the UN has frustrated many Burmese exiled students and activists who are compelled to ask questions on the impotence of this international diplomacy. And thus start calling upon their fellow countrymen and women to rise up on the basis of self reliance and to shed the 'dependant mentality' dominating the exiled political leadership for the last two decades.

As Newton's second law of nature implied that on each and every action there are equal and opposite reaction, thus, it is naturally only a matter of time when equal reactionary forces would emerge to counter the injustice inside Burma. As shown in many political histories, once political problems could not be solved peacefully, desperation would force discontented individual(s) seeking alternative options to counter the injustice.

Therefore, it is imperative that key democratic countries should help unite the exiled Burmese democratic movement to form a broad grass-root based democratic umbrella global organization that has the mandate if exiled communities across the globe. Under the prevailing political circumstances, the united but not fragmented exiled community is the only viable force left to lead the restoration of democracy in Burma peacefully while countering current military rulers' seven step road map in the long run.

[Dr. Sein Myint is the director of Policy Development of Justice for Human Rights in Burma, located in Maryland, USA . He is an Honorary Member of Amnesty International Chapter 22 in Washington D.C.]

[Eight ministers and Rangoon's mayor to resign soon](#)

Mizzima News - Tuesday, 09 December 2008 18:13

Chiang Mai - At least eight ministers in the cabinet of Burma's military government along with the mayor of Rangoon will resign from their current positions in preparation to contest the upcoming 2010 election, a source in the military said.

According to the source in Naypyitaw, ministers from the Ministries of Forestry, Construction, Immigration & Population, Livestock Breeding & Fisheries, Transport, Agriculture & Irrigation, Industry (1), Communication, Posts & Telegraphs, in addition to the mayor of Rangoon, will soon retire from their positions as part of the lead up to the 2010 general election.

Despite criticism from the political opposition, Burma's military junta is determined to carry out its planned seven step roadmap, which includes the general election as its fifth component.

"The ministers will contest in constituencies where they are sure of gaining majority support," said an observer in Burma, adding that Aung Thawng from the Ministry of Industry (1) is likely to contest in Mandalay, while Brigadier General Thein Zaw from the Ministry of Communication, Posts & Telegraphs is likely to run in Myitkyina, Kachin state.

He added that the junta is also likely to impose restrictions on opposition parties – including the National League for Democracy (NLD) – in contesting the election that is likely to shape a new government for the country with limited civilian participation.

Despite a landslide win in the last general election in 1990, Burma's military junta denied power to the NLD, instead placing party leader and Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest.

The list of the eight ministers and the mayor, who are likely to resign from their positions, are given below:

Sl. No	Position/ Names	Position/inistries
1	Brigadier General, Thein Aung	Minister, Ministry of Forestry
2	Major General, Saw Tun	Minister, Ministry of Construction
3	Major General, Saw Lwin	Minister, Ministry of Immigration & Population
4	Brigadier General, Maung Maung Thein	Minister, Ministry of Livestock Breeding & Fisheries
5	Major General, Thein Swe	Minister, Ministry of Trasport
6	U, Aung Thaug	Minister, Ministry of Industry No. (1)
7	Major General, Htay Oo	Minister, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation
8	Brigadier General, Thein Zaw	Minister, Ministry of Communications, Posts & Telegraphs
9	Brigadier General, Aung Thein Linn	Mayor of Rangoon

[Burma: Struggling for human rights – Interview with HRW's David Scott Mathieson](#)

Mizzima News - Wednesday, 10 December 2008 12:25

New Delhi (Mizzima) - December 10th marks the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations, to which military-ruled Burma is party.

While the world marks the occasion, Burmese continue to live without their basic rights, denied by their military rulers, says David Scott Mathieson, Burma consultant for the New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW), who has closely monitored human rights developments in Burma for years.

Mathieson, during a brief interview with Mizzima's Salai Pi Pi, said the United Nations as well as the world community faces a huge task in assisting Burmese in achieving their basic rights.

Q: What is the picture of human rights in Burma today?

Mathieson: Unfortunately, there is little to celebrate in Burma with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, because of the human rights condition that has come to depict Burma. In almost every aspect of Universal Human Rights, the situation in Burma is quite grave.

Q: Has there been any progress in the human rights situation in Burma?

Mathieson: There has been very little progress in the past 60 years on human rights in Burma. We can say, especially in the past 20 years, that there has actually been more deterioration [in the human rights situation in Burma]. There is still a long way to go.

Q: From a human rights aspect, how do you view the recent sentencing of several political prisoners in Burma?

Mathieson: The recent sentencing of political activists, artists like Zarganar, journalists, Buddhist monks, Internet activists and poets, demonstrates very clearly to the United Nations and the world that the military government is not serious about respecting human rights. All these people, around 200, are people who should be involved in the country's politic on a daily basis and especially on the day to mark the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Q: What do you think should be done to promote human rights in Burma?

Mathieson: Basic freedoms need to be respected. The first thing that the international community has to do is not to simply criticize the SPDC [Burma's military government]. They must also put pressure on human rights bodies within the international community. And they need to put more pressure on China, India, Russia and the countries of Southeast Asia to be more proactive on human rights in Burma.

Secondly, I think Burmese society has to be supported by the international community. We must support civil society in the country in helping to end military rule and in achieving the basic freedoms they have long been denied.

Q: Anything else that you would like to add on the human rights situation in Burma?

Mathieson: As the situation is getting worse, international attention must increase. It is not enough for the international community to express their frustration with the SPDC. They must find a way to make the situation better. And I think the international community owes the people in Burma that much. We witnessed in the past year the crackdown [of the September 2007 monk-led protests] and the response to the cyclone [Nargis] – the people inside Burma are suffering. These are but two more reminders on the eve of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration that more needs to be done.

Isolated, but Not Insulated

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 9, 2008

By MIN LWIN

The financial crisis that began in the United States and rapidly evolved into a once-in-a-generation global economic downturn has reached Burma, a country whose military leaders have long prided themselves on their ability to keep outside influences at bay.

Despite being locked out of the US financial system by sanctions designed to force the ruling junta to make democratic reforms, Burmese businesses are suffering from a credit crunch of their own, stemming from the reluctance of commodity exporters to lend to producers.

"I can't borrow any money," said Thein Tin Aung, the owner of 10 acres of rice paddy in Nyaung Laybin, a township in Pegu Division.

Thein Tin Aung (not his real name), said that he had traveled to Pegu, the capital of the division, to borrow money for workers' wages, but was unable to secure a loan.

"Most exporters have no money to lend or pay in advance to farmers, who need credit so they can harvest their crops," he said. "We have collateral, such as farms and motorbikes, but no one will give us the cash to pay wages."

The lack of credit for farmers—which in largely agrarian Burma comes mainly from traders who sell rice, beans, pulses and other cash crops to neighboring countries—is the result of the economic slowdown hitting the rest of the region. As the country's main trading partners—Thailand, India and China—all strain under the effects of the recession, Burmese exporters are also hurting.

"The price of export goods, including beans and rice, is falling," said an analyst from the Rangoon Institute of Economics, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Exports have been at a standstill for several months now," he added. "Many exporters have begun to stockpile grains because they don't want to sell at a loss."

Meanwhile, the country's ruling junta remains in denial about the impact of the global slowdown. On December 2, the state-run *Myanma Alin* newspaper reported the prime minister, Gen Thein Sein, as saying that Burma would not be affected by the financial meltdown.

Instead of addressing the crisis, the Burmese regime appears to be adding to the problem by squeezing the public to meet its own budgetary shortfalls, according to analysts.

"Unlike other governments, which are offering bailouts and stimulus measures, in Burma, the regime is trying to get more money from the general public," said Aung Thu Nyein of the Thailand-based Vahu Development Institute.

He cited the imposition of a license fee for motorcycles in July as an example of efforts to increase government revenues. According to police statistics, the regime has so far issued 877,405 licenses, raising 230 billion kyat (US \$184 million) over the past five months. Meanwhile, it has auctioned off other vehicles seized from owners who failed to pay license fees.

Any hopes that Burma will be spared the worst of the global economic downturn must take into account the junta's knack for taking a bad situation and making it worse, says Aung Thu Nyein.

"The Burmese financial crisis will be worse than in other countries because of the government's mismanagement," he said.

More Burmese Workers Leave Malaysia

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 9, 2008

By SAW YAN NAING

More than 100 Burmese migrant workers have returned to Burma over the last week after losing their jobs in Malaysia due to the impact of the global economic slowdown, according to a labor rights group in Malaysia.

The secretary of the Malaysia-based Burma Workers' Rights Protection Committee (BWRPC), Ye Min Tun, said that some 118 Burmese migrants, working mostly in Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur, were sent back to Burma on December 6 and 8 by their employers after their companies had cut back on staff due to falling orders and a decrease in business.

The recent employment cutbacks follow a similar situation at the Press Metal Berhad aluminum factory in Malaysia, which in late November repatriated 300 Burmese migrants who lost their jobs because of the economic slowdown.

There are an estimated 500,000 legal and illegal Burmese migrant workers and refugees in Malaysia, according to Ye Min Tun.

In Thailand, about 3,000 Burmese migrant workers in border town Mae Sot became jobless in late November, an estimated 400 of whom have returned to Burma, according to Mae Sot-based Yaung Chi Oo Burmese Workers Association.

On December 2, Burma's Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein stated that there are "plenty of jobs available for millions of Burmese migrant workers if they are forced to return home."

He was quoted in the state-run *Myanma Alin* newspaper as saying that Burma would not be affected by the global financial meltdown.

However, an exiled labor rights activist in Thailand disagreed with the Burmese premier's comments.

"It is a groundless statement," Moe Swe, the head of the Yaung Chi Oo Burmese Workers Association, said. "If there are plenty of jobs for people in Burma, why have millions left Burma to work abroad?"

There are an estimated 4 million Burmese working abroad, predominantly in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea, said Moe Swe.

Despite the economic downturn, Burmese people still come to look for jobs in Malaysia, Ye Min Tun said. In one week, about 200 Burmese migrant workers arrive here looking for jobs, added the BWRPC secretary.

EDITORIAL: No Time Like the Present

Irrawaddy - Tuesday, December 9, 2008

In May, when news of American warships near Burma's shores reached survivors of Cyclone Nargis, they were immediately cheered by the possibility of humanitarian intervention. Abandoned by the Burmese regime and struggling to feed themselves, they could do little else but hope for deliveries of food and medicine from foreign troops.

In the end, they were disappointed to learn that the warships had left without coming to their assistance. Once again, the tantalizing fantasy of a sudden, dramatic collapse of tyranny in Burma vanished, leaving only lingering questions about what the international community would be willing to do to free this long-oppressed country.

Overthrowing the regime of Snr-Gen Than Shwe and his minions, who rule from their distant capital of Naypyidaw, could be accomplished in a matter of hours. Then opposition and ethnic leaders, including those who are now serving long prison sentences, could step in to form a caretaker government during a transition period that would last just a few months before elections could be held.

Unlike Iraq, Burma would not require a protracted occupation or a costly commitment to nation-building. Billions of dollars might need to be pumped into the country at first, but probably no more than what the US now spends in a single month to keep Iraq from imploding. It would be a small price to pay to see a tyrant removed from power and a free Burma reborn.

US President George W Bush, who met with exiled activists in Bangkok in August, has offered his symbolic support for the cause of democracy in Burma, but many wonder if there isn't more he could do to help the Burmese people achieve their dream of freedom.

Unfortunately, Burma's fate is still in the hands of Than Shwe, the man who refused to speak with United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for weeks after Cyclone Nargis struck on May 2-3.

Ban, who eventually received an audience with the recalcitrant general, was careful not to raise political issues during his visit in late May. He merely appealed to Than Shwe to allow humanitarian aid workers into the country. Of course, the fate of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, who at that time was just coming to the end of her fifth year under house arrest, was completely off the agenda.

After Ban's visit, many Burmese bitterly joked that the UN had once again saved the day—for the regime.

For Than Shwe, the visit only served to send a clear message that he remains firmly in control. In the months since Ban's departure from Burma, the aging general has pursued his political agenda of forcing the country to accept his vision of a "disciplined democracy" with renewed vigor.

While the UN continues to demand the release of more than 2,000 political prisoners, the junta has added hundreds more to their ranks. This outrage prompted 112 former world leaders, including former US presidents Jimmy Carter and George H W Bush, former British prime ministers Tony Blair, John Major and Margaret Thatcher, and former Japanese PM Junichiro Koizumi, to call on the UN chief to return to Burma.

In a petition organized by Norway's ex-prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, they urged Ban to meet with Burmese leaders to push for the release of detained activists and politicians. Even if a return trip was not possible, they said, he should "make it clear that all political prisoners in Burma must be released by the end of this year."

Ban's response was disappointing for Burma watchers, and devastating for the country's political prisoners. He said that he would not visit because it would be futile to do so at this time. In other words, he conceded defeat—although all he would admit to was feeling "frustrated" by the lack of progress.

On December 5, soon after a meeting of the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Burma, Ban tried to put a positive spin on the latest chapter in the UN's never-ending saga of failure in the Southeast Asian country.

Speaking to reporters, he said: "The Government of Myanmar [Burma] has officially declared that cooperation with the United Nations is a cornerstone of their foreign policy. We welcome it and we look forward to continue, and expect a concrete action by them to implement their commitment."

It is, of course, impossible to believe anything the junta says about its willingness to "cooperate"—this is, after all, a regime that has lied repeatedly to the people of Burma and to the international community. But Ban seemed to accept it, if only because it absolved him of his duty to take more decisive action.

But Ban has not ruled out the possibility of returning to Burma when the time is right.

"I am ready to visit Myanmar again, to continue our consultations on various issues—humanitarian issues, and also political issues," he said. "At this time, I do not think that the atmosphere is ripe for me to undertake my own visit there."

Ban fails to acknowledge, however, that it is his responsibility to create the conditions that will make the junta more receptive to his message. It makes no sense to leave the prospect of change to the initiative of a regime that has clung to power for two decades. If the UN wants to help, it must do it now—not when it is convenient.

[How Burma's opposition lost its fear](#)

Independent - Wednesday, 10 December 2008

Despite the junta's crackdown, Phoebe Kennedy finds a new mood of defiance on the streets of Rangoon

By Phoebe Kennedy in Rangoon

I was bumping along Rangoon's streets in a battered taxi when I saw the crowd, men and women wearing red armbands, most with heads bowed, looking uncomfortable, even frightened.

Any crowd in Burma's old colonial capital is a rarity and I asked the driver who they were. "NLD," he muttered. I asked him to stop and walked back up the street. I had not noticed it before but tucked between two shops selling cheap wooden furniture is the office of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party of Aung San Suu Kyi, the icon of Burmese democracy and political prisoner who remains confined to her decaying lakeside home on University Avenue, a mile or so away.

The NLD was the landslide winner of elections in 1990, immediately annulled by the ruling military to keep themselves in power. In the 18 intervening years, depressingly little has changed in Burma's political landscape.

U Hla Tin introduced himself as a member of parliament (who has never taken up his seat) and steered me through the overspill of NLD members on the pavement. The crowd of about 80 people was braving not just the glare of Burma's midday sun but the scrutiny of watching plain-clothed military intelligence officers across the street.

A recent flurry of lengthy jail sentences meted out to Burmese dissidents made their simple decision to come out to support their party a stunningly brave one. In recent months, hundreds of activists, along with journalists, bloggers, a comedian and a hip hop star have been handed decades-long sentences and dispatched to remote jails across the Burmese gulag.

"Aren't you scared?" I asked the MP. "No," he said with a smile. "We don't care." He and his colleagues had faced up to the worst that could happen to them, it seemed, and were no longer afraid.

Inside, in a gloomy shop-cum-house, with yellowing walls and ceiling fans whirring, it was hard to believe we were in the offices of the party which should be running a country of more than 50 million. I was ushered to a plastic chair near the front.

U Hla Pe, a member of the NLD central executive committee, read dryly from a written speech calling for political prisoners to be released and for the junta to implement an urgent review of a new constitution which enshrines their role in any future elected government.

A woman in the audience, her greying hair pinned back, wiped away silent tears as she listened to demands that are unlikely ever to be met. U Hla Pe finished, took a sip from his water glass, his hand shaking, and was helped down from the wooden podium. He rejoined the NLD top brass seated behind him; two rows of noble, elderly men, their political dreams reduced to empty protocol.

The NLD has been criticised for its lack of direction and new ideas. Not surprising, given that most of its best political minds are behind bars. And communication with Ms Suu Kyi, under house arrest, is impossible, said U Hla Tin. "We don't speak to her, we don't hear from her, no no no," he shook his head. "How can we know what she's thinking?"

Rudderless and reduced by imprisonments, the remnants of Suu Kyi's party are trying to decide whether to contest elections set for 2010. There is almost no prospect of a fair vote, Burma's generals will no

doubt ensure that their puppet civilian organisation, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) will form the winning party. But the NLD's refusal to engage with the military's stage-managed "road-map to democracy" means the party risks becoming isolated and irrelevant as the years tick by.

Some of Ms Suu Kyi's supporters want a change of tactic. According to the online bulletins of Burma's exiled opposition, calls for greater engagement in the military's skewed political process are led by the veteran journalist and NLD executive U Win Tin, released in September after 19 years in jail. Reports say pressure has been added by Western diplomats who have met privately with NLD leaders to urge them to participate.

But the party rank and file are circumspect. "In the West you always talk of a level playing field," said another disenfranchised MP. "Here our game is played on the side of a mountain."

They streamed out of the meeting, walking in pairs or small groups to catch an ancient bus or taxi home. They kept their heads down, with wary sideways glances at the men across the street.

[ASEAN human rights body: Will it have an impact on Myanmar's junta?](#)

Jakarta Post - Wed, 12/10/2008 10:51 AM

Djoko Susilo , Jakarta | Opinion

Almost a year ago, at a meeting of parliamentarians of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, I urged the ASEAN states to freeze Myanmar's membership from the 10-member grouping since there had been no serious political will to implement democracy and protect human rights, such as by releasing its jailed political opponents -- especially Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from her house detention.

Last year's incidents in Myanmar proved that such a call is indeed still valid and it will still be valid until the domestic situation in that country moves toward democracy.

The violent crackdown and the junta's brutality against the peaceful demonstrations of the Buddhist monks -- who were supported by the Myanmar people -- were well documented and widely known throughout the international community, yet the junta recently tried to fool the world by announcing a so-called general election.

Regrettably some ASEAN leaders have expressed their readiness to cooperate with the junta and welcomed the last false referendum and the planned election as "real" progress. It is a shameful act and betrays the people of Burma/Myanmar. They don't really care about the sufferings of the people who have been oppressed by the military junta for almost two decades.

Indeed, we cannot just sit back and wait until the situation improves. Action must be taken because there has been no serious will from the military junta to work for a peaceful solution to Myanmar's problems.

With this appeal, the international community needs to work together and have a united stand to put more pressure on Myanmar. The Indonesian government, in this case, supports the efforts of democratization and reconciliation. In his meeting with UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said it was necessary to push for Myanmar's reconciliation process from many aspects.

However, the Indonesian government believes that those aspects that must be advocated in Myanmar are not only related to democracy and human rights, but also to security and stability as potential threats to Myanmar's disintegration. This is the way to handle Myanmar's psychological issues, especially with the sense of insecurity and inconvenience of the ruling government in the context of the new Myanmar.

The Indonesian government also strongly supports Gambari's mission to solve Myanmar's problems within UN's framework and Indonesia will ensure that the issue remains on the UN Security Council's agenda.

In addition, Indonesia urges the Chinese and Indian governments to do more to convince Myanmar to improve its dismal human rights record. We believe it is important to enlist the help of these two nations to convince the junta to fulfill its promise to embrace democracy.

Within the ASEAN context, especially in its relations between the Myanmar issue and the signing of the ASEAN Charter in Singapore last year or its finalization later this year (probably) in Thailand, many have

expressed concerns as to whether the charter will work as expected, especially after the recent troubles in that member country. The Indonesian parliament, for example, has expressed its concern over several of the ASEAN Charter's articles -- a legally binding treaty that regulates relations among the 10 members of ASEAN.

Recent reports of senior officials meeting in Denpasar, Bali, in preparation for the upcoming ASEAN summit produced discouraging news. The members of the high-level panel have yet to agree on the official name of the human rights body. Some reports suggest that many countries in ASEAN are more interested in the "promotion" rather than the "protection" of human rights.

Sihesak Phuangketkeow, a senior Thai diplomat who chaired the meeting said that human rights promotion and protection would be an evolutionary process given the differences of the ASEAN members, in terms of their diversities, stages of development and political awareness.

Thus, member countries do not expect too much on the protection of human rights from within ASEAN, let alone its ability to maintain peace and security in the region. Myanmar will be the biggest offender, and the crimes committed by the junta will go unpunished.

Indonesia acknowledges that ASEAN's diplomatic efforts to prod Myanmar to rapidly democratize have failed. ASEAN has recognized that its constructive engagement has not produced any tangible results. But sanctions and pressures by western countries have also failed.

Within the ASEAN Parliamentary, the Myanmar tragedy is a catastrophe for the region. The Parliamentarians urge their governments to take strong actions and recognize the seriousness of the human security problems caused by the Myanmar regime. We must be as one to end the misery and sufferings of the Myanmar people.

The writer is member of the Indonesian House of Representatives and Chairman of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary on Myanmar Caucus.

[Ban urges "group of friends", corporates to influence Burma](#)

Mizzima News - Tuesday, 09 December 2008 22:15

New Delhi (Mizzima) – Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations General Secretary has urged governments and corporate houses that have a relationship going with Burma to use their influence to impress the military rulers to implement its commitment to democratic reforms in the country.

Ban Ki-moon, speaking to reporters after a close door consultation with a group of 'Friends on Myanmar' on Friday, said all countries and corporate houses, whoever is cooperating with Burma should use whatever leverage they have to influence the Burmese regime to go in for democratic transition.

"Whoever has influence with Myanmar [Burma], should try to use their cooperation or their relationship to impress upon the Myanmar [Burma] authorities so that they can commit to their democratization process," Ban said.

Ban, however, said he will not be making any visits in the near future, as he thinks the visit cannot be productive and meaningful.

Ban, who in May visited the Southeast Asian nation in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, on Monday, was urged by Asian parliamentarians to make a fresh trip to the country and push for the release of political prisoners including Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been detained for more than 13 of the past 19 years.

The UN Chief, however, said "At this time I do not think that the atmosphere is ripe for me to undertake my own visit there [Burma]."

Rather, the world body chief said, all countries particularly members of the group of "Friends on Myanmar" should use "their influence, they should use whatever available leverage and tools to impress upon the Government of Myanmar [Burma] to implement its commitment."

[Life on Myanmar's biofuels plantations](#)

Straits Times - December 10, 2008 Wednesday, 03:42 PM

Jessica Cheam shares her insight on Myanmar's sunrise biofuels industry.

As a clean energy reporter, I often write about new developments in technologies such as solar and biofuels, but seldom get the chance to get up close and personal with the actual process.

But just a couple of months back, I was given the opportunity to get my hands dirty, literally, when I was invited to visit a jatropha plantation in Myanmar.

It couldn't have been a more unlikely destination, and it almost didn't happen because of cyclone Nargis. But fortunately, the damage done to the plantation was repairable and I finally made it to Myanmar where for the first time, where I could touch the plant, seeds, fruits, that I often wrote about. And spoke to the people who made it happen.

So let me give you the context of my visit: Biofuels is an industry that is both full of promise and controversy.

Singapore has a number of biofuels refineries itself, and the EDB has singled the sector as one of the key renewable energy areas important to Singapore's economy.

But on one hand, while biofuels is a key player in the world's future energy mix - one that is renewable and can make our transport fuels cleaner, its development can also lead to deforestation as it competes with food crops for arable land if not managed sustainably.

Amidst this raging debate on the sustainability of biofuels, a second generation of feedstock has emerged - one that uses non-food crops. The jatropha plant, algae, wood mass from plant waste have been singled out as some promising "fuels of the future" as they don't compete with food and can grow in hardy conditions or exist abundantly in other locations.

In Asia, many countries have particularly caught on the jatropha "fever", with China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Myanmar planting its seed extensively in the hope of riding on the wave of this sunrise industry.

But these feedstocks are also not without its risks. Most are relatively under-researched, and no one knows if full-scale commercial applications of using such feedstocks to make biofuel will be successful yet.

So it is with all these considerations that I went with my eyes wide open to visit the 100,000 acre estate at Maw Tin, in south Myanmar, to get a better understanding of how the industry and this particular feedstock works.

And my experience did not disappoint.

I was happy to learn that biofuels can be cultivated sustainably and responsibly if planned for, right at the beginning.

The plantation was eco-friendly and completely self-sufficient. It had the hallmarks of Singaporean planning and efficiency, if I might say so. And not surprisingly, it had a Singapore connection.

The plantation is the work of Singapore-listed firm Yoma Strategic Holdings, which has a unit, Plantation Resources, which manages and sells produce from this estate in partnership with a local Myanmar firm called Myanmar Agri-Tech.

The plantation has a 650-strong community, mostly local farmers, who go about planting the seeds, harvesting them, sorting the seeds out, and then re-planting them again. When I spoke to Myanmarese farm worker Thin Thin Khing, she tells me of her days in the fields.

Six days a week, working from 6.30am to 11am, then 1 to 4pm. Days off for the 29-year-old are spent relaxing with her co-workers in Patheingyi city, less than half an hour away. She's worked on the farm for more than a year now.

Before this, she says, she had never worked before, and was mainly doing housework for her family. Now, she earns about US\$45 (54,000 *kyat* - the local currency pronounced like "chut") a month - above the national average of US\$30.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner are provided on the farm, prepared by cooks who live on the plantation. Their food is also produced on the estate, where beans, rice, vegetables and even domestic animals such as goats and pigs are reared for consumption.

Power for the plantation comes from burning biomass (rice husks) and water is pumped from underground, making the entire plantation almost carbon neutral, save for the diesel used to power vehicles. I even spotted the kids of the farmers riding a baby elephant, which they had tamed from the wild, now used to do menial physical work on the plantation.

I visited the workers' quarters and the kampong-like huts where children and parents of the plantation workers - three generations of a family - were living together in a cosy village setting. It was all very "harmonious" living - nature, wild life, and humans, all on this plantation.

I was impressed to see the degree of planning involved in the plantation, especially how the way it was run sharply contrasted the reports from NGOs that have surfaced on how the Myanmar government's jatropha drive has backfired on itself.

Organisations such as the Ethnic Community Development Forum allege that Myanmar's junta have used forced labour or confiscated land in some locations. And has directed the entire nation of farmers to plant jatropha wherever they can, without fully understanding the climatic conditions needed to cultivate the plant successfully.

Chief executive of Myanmar Agri-Tech, Mr Frankie Tan, who oversees all of Yoma's plantations, notes that the junta's drive has got "good intentions" but lacks a clear roadmap. Farmers are told to plant the seeds, but there is no system to collect them, and also - no refinery to convert the seeds into refined biodiesel.

This is where Yoma's chief executive Serge Pun, a Myanmar-born tycoon who made his fortune in real estate developments across Asia, wants to play a part.

He told me that he hoped Yoma's farm would be a model example for the rest of the country to follow.

When sourcing land for the plantation, Mr Pun gave strict instructions not to use arable land meant for food. The whole estate was also designed to be self-sufficient, it has an office on site and workers' quarters for the farmers and their families. It's important for the firm to "do things right and sustainably" if it wanted to be a long-term player in the jatropha market, he said.

And now, Yoma is expanding by implementing a contract farming strategy which will make it the biggest jatropha seed collector in Myanmar. This will possibly salvage the current situation in Myanmar where farmers are stuck with jatropha seeds, but no buyers.

And there's more in the pipeline. Yoma is planning to build a biodiesel refinery in partnership with a major Korean biofuels supplier, Enertech. It will be three miles from Maw Tin, along the Yangon River, and will facilitate both domestic use and export of the biofuel - something that might save Myanmar from spending millions of its foreign reserves on fuel imports (a top reason why Myanmar's government have embraced jatropha in such a big way). Mr Pun, who has been doing business in Myanmar for 18 years, is bullish about jatropha's prospects, despite its critics - which is why Yoma has pumped in US\$6 million into their jatropha operations in the country so far.

And from what I saw, I'm convinced biofuels can be a sustainable business if done right. The challenge is putting the regulations and/or private sector initiatives in place such that this can be ensured.

When this is achieved, a true win-win situation will benefit all parties involved - and the environment. We'll have a world with fuels that are cleaner, companies that can make a profit supplying it, and a nation of farmers who might find that a seed could be their ticket out of poverty.

Asian Lawmakers Push UN Chief on Burma

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 8, 2008

By WAI MOE, More than 240 Asian lawmakers have called for the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to press Burma's junta for the release of all political prisoners in the country.

The Asean Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC), which organized this campaign, said in a press release on Monday that a total of 241 parliamentarians from Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand have sent a public letter to Ban urging him to ensure the release of all Burma's political prisoners by December 31.

It is believed to be the first time in history that a large group of Asian lawmakers have sent a public letter to the UN.

Roshan Jason, the executive director of the AIPMC, told *The Irrawaddy* on Monday that the group of Asian representatives has chosen Burma's political prisoner issue because it is an essential step in the process of national reconciliation in the country.

"The most important human rights issue is the release of political prisoners [in Burma] now," he said.

In the letter to the UN secretary-general, the Asian lawmakers said that the Burmese junta has used prisoners of conscience as political pawns, releasing a handful during and after visits by UN envoys while avoiding a complete release that would allow pave the way for true national reconciliation.

"The suffering of the people must not be allowed to continue and the world can no longer sit idly by and only assist them when there is a devastating natural disaster," said Kraisaak Choonhavan, president of the AIPMC and a member of parliament for Thailand's Democrat Party.

The Asian parliamentarians' call followed a similar petition on December 3 by 112 former world leaders—including Corazon Aquino, Tony Blair, George H W Bush, Jimmy Carter, Mikhail Gorbachev, John Howard, Chandrika Kumaratunga, John Major, Margaret Thatcher and Lech Walesa—to the head of the UN, calling for the release of all political prisoners in Burma.

However, Ban told reporters on Friday that he will not visit Burma in the near future unless political progress is evident in the country.

"At this time, I do not think that the atmosphere is ripe for me to undertake my own visit there," he said. "But I am committed, and I am ready to visit any time when I can have reasonable expectations my visit will be productive and meaningful."

Commenting on Ban Ki-moon's response, Roshan Jason said that he should reconsider his decision of canceling the trip.

"He should realize that he would perhaps create a greater impact and [bring discussions over the political prisoners to the forefront of negotiations] with leaders of the regime," the executive director of AIPMC said. "It is better to see them (the Burmese generals) in person—there will be more opportunity to talk about this particular issue and he can show his commitment to making sure prisoners are released."

Meanwhile, analysts are skeptical of the impact of the international campaigns to free political prisoners in Burma.

"The international community highlighting the Burma crisis, such as issuing statements and petitions, is good," said Aung Naing Oo, a Burmese commentator based in Thailand. "But the junta will think of this kind of action as just shooting them with flowers."

Since early November, courts in Burmese prisons have sentenced more than 200 people—from pro-democracy activists to bloggers—with jail terms of up to 65 years imprisonment.

Aung Naing Oo said the junta often uses long-term imprisonment as a tool of "pre-emptive repression" to deter dissident movements.

[U.N. must be tough on Burma's dictators](#)

UPI Asia - December 08, 2008

By Zin Linn

Bangkok, Thailand — This month marks the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Communities, organizations and governments around the world will celebrate U.N. Human Rights Day on Dec. 10.

Article 9 of the declaration states: "Everyone has the right to liberty; any detention must be lawful and should be used only as a last resort." This article may seem strange to the people of Burma, however. In the military-ruled country, even possessing a booklet containing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights could send one to jail for several years. To people's disappointment, Burma is still lacking in human rights education and practices.

No one is under any illusion about the willingness of Burma's military regime to ruthlessly take action against challengers who are tired of the military dictatorship. Nonetheless, the sentences handed down on 14 protesters on Nov. 11 were shockingly harsh.

The protesters were found guilty of four charges of using electronic media without permission and given 15 years' imprisonment for each charge, plus five years for forming an unlawful organization, 65 years in total. The sentences were handed down during a closed-door hearing at the infamous Insein prison. On the same day, authorities gave a harsh verdict to several dissidents for their participation in the protests in August and September of last year.

Thet Zin and Sein Win Maung, respectively editor and manager of the privately-owned Myanmar Nation Journal, were sentenced by a summary court in Rangoon on Nov. 28 for being in possession of dissenting documents, including a U.N. Special Rapporteur's Human Rights report on Burma.

These sentences are typical of Burma's military regime, which has been ignoring calls from the international community to improve its human rights record. These retributions also contradict the junta's claim that its new Constitution and electoral procedure for 2010 prove the effort it is making toward political change.

The release of all political prisoners is a vital step toward national reconciliation, but the regime's current stance is still backward-looking. It continues to defy the presidential statement by the U.N. Security Council on Oct. 11, 2007, calling for the release of all political prisoners in Burma. The U.N. Security Council needs to take concrete action to secure their release, without further delay. These recent sentences are some of the harshest punishments handed out by the regime since 1988.

At least 215 Burmese political activists were sentenced in November alone, according to a report released on Dec. 1 by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma). The first trial of activists arrested in connection with last year's uprising in August and September began on Oct. 8, 2007. Since then, at least 384 protesters have been sentenced, over half of them in November, confirming recent reports that the regime plans to speed up trials of political dissenters.

The ugliest abuse of power is the junta's dissolution of justice. The sentences recently handed down have ranged from four months on charges of "contempt of court" for National League for Democracy lawyers U Khin Maung Shein and U Aung Thein to life imprisonment plus eight years for Human Rights Defenders and Promoters network founding member U Myint Aye, on explosives charges.

Former political prisoner and well-known comedian Zarganar, arrested for his efforts to coordinate volunteer relief efforts after Cyclone Nargis hit in May this year, received sentences totaling 59 years. All Burma Monks' Alliance leader U Gambira, who played a leading role in last year's Saffron Revolution, was given sentences totaling 68 years. Twenty-three members of the 88 Generation Students Group, who led the protests against fuel price hikes in August last year, were handed sentences of at least 65 years each.

Meanwhile, on Dec. 3, a letter signed by 112 former presidents and prime ministers – including former U.S. presidents George H.W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, former British prime ministers Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher and John Major, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and former Polish President Lech Walesa – urged U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-

moon to return to Myanmar and pressure the military junta to free all political prisoners. The letter, an effort led by former Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik of Norway, said Ban should make good on the Security Council's call in Oct. 2007 for Burma to release the prisoners, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

Two days later, on Dec. 5, another public letter signed by 241 parliamentarians from eight Asian countries – South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia – was sent to Ban, urging him to obtain the release of all political prisoners from Burma by Dec. 31. This letter expressed the parliamentary members' concerns about the lack of progress in Myanmar's human rights situation.

"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," said Kraisaak Choonhavan, president of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus, who hosted the petition.

"The suffering of the people must not be allowed to continue and the world can no longer sit idly by and only assist them when there is a devastating natural disaster," he added, in a separate cover letter to the U.N. secretary general.

Despite the fact that Burma has intensified the tempo of imprisoning political opponents, human rights defenders, bloggers and journalists, Ban met with his "Group of Friends on Myanmar" on Dec. 5. Afterwards, he told the media that he will only go to Burma if there are positive steps by the Than Shwe regime, including the release of political prisoners.

In direct non-cooperation with the United Nations, the military regime has not only refused to release political prisoners and take part in meaningful dialogue, but has doubled the number of political prisoners in excess of 2,100. Burma's military dictators have continued to ignore Article 9 of the UDHR, which says that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

On this 60th anniversary of the UDHR, the world body should make concerted efforts, through prestigious organizations and governments, to carry out the true meaning of the significant charter. Burma's human rights problem should be the first task for the United Nations to deal with, in order to make an extraordinary example. The United Nations must not surrender to the military dictators of Burma. The United Nations must be tough enough to confront military dictatorship.

--

[\(Zin Linn](#) is a freelance Burmese journalist living in exile. He currently serves as information director of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma in Bangkok, Thailand. He is also vice-president of the Burma Media Association, which is affiliated with the Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontiers. He can be contacted at uzinlinn@gmail.com. ©Copyright Zin Linn.)

[UN chief frustrated over lack of democratic steps in Myanmar](#)

AFP – 6 December 2008

UNITED NATIONS — UN chief Ban Ki-moon voiced growing frustration at the failure by Myanmar's military regime to restore democracy and ruled out a return visit to the country at present.

After meeting with envoys of key countries seeking to foster dialogue between the military regime and its democratic opposition, Ban told reporters on Friday he sensed "not only high expectations but also growing frustration that our efforts have yet to yield the results we all hoped for."

"I share this sense of expectation and frustration," he added, noting he expected Myanmar rulers "to implement their commitments" regarding the release of political prisoners, including opposition leader and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

"I urge the government of Myanmar to respond positively without further delay to our specific suggestions," Ban said as he appealed to all countries to "use whatever available leverage and tools to impress on the government of Myanmar (the need) to implement their commitments."

The UN secretary general said he remained committed to pursuing his good offices role to bring about national reconciliation in Myanmar but ruled out a return visit in the immediate future.

"At this time I do not think that the atmosphere is ripe for me to undertake my own visit there," he said. "But I am committed, and I am ready to visit any time, whenever I can have reasonable expectations of my visit, to be productive and meaningful."

Ban made a lightning visit to the country in May after its military rulers came under international fire for not allowing foreign aid in after a cyclone left 138,000 people dead or missing.

The UN boss made the remarks Friday after huddling with his so-called "group of friends on Myanmar."

The group comprises the five permanent members of the UN Security Council -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- as well as Australia, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam.

On Wednesday, more than 100 former leaders wrote to the UN chief urging him to travel to Myanmar to secure the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners.

The prominent figures behind the letter include ex-US presidents George H.W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, ex-Australian premier John Howard, former French prime minister Lionel Jospin, former Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi and ex-Philippine leaders Fidel Ramos and Corazon Aquino.

The letter recalled that the Council had on October 11 last year issued a statement urging the early release of all political prisoners in Myanmar.

The United Nations also had set the release of all political prisoners as one of its benchmark goals for 2008.

However, in direct defiance of these demands, the military junta has instead increased the number of political prisoners from 1,200 in June 2007 to over 2,100, the letter stated.

Last month, more than 100 Myanmar activists, including members of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and relief workers, journalists, monks and lawyers, were each given harsh sentences of up to 68 years in prison.

Their jailing came in the wake of a crackdown on those involved in protests in mid-2007 that were brutally crushed by the military junta.

UN Role 'Not Enough': Ban

Irrawaddy - Saturday, December 6, 2008

By LALIT K JHA, UNITED NATIONS — UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said on Friday his direct involvement was "not enough" to resolve the current political stalemate in Burma and all its neighbors must play a more assertive role.

"My good offices should not be seen as an end in itself, or as a justification for inaction," he told reporters at the UN headquarters in New York. "In order to be able to pursue this role in an effective manner, it is necessary for all concerned parties across the spectrum to step up efforts to help my good offices move forward."

After attending a meeting of the Secretary General's Group of Friends on Burma, Ban told reporters: "While I will continue my good offices role as mandated by the General Assembly, all the countries of the membership, particularly the Group of Friends countries, should use their influence, they should use whatever available leverage and tools to impress upon the Government of Myanmar [Burma] to implement their commitment."

Ban created the Group of Friends on Burma last year to aid and advise him on the various issues related to Burma, in particular how to proceed on a path of democratization and national reconciliation.

Members are Australia, China, the European Union, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Norway, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Britain, the US and Vietnam.

The meeting was convened in the aftermath of a letter written to Ban by more than 100 former presidents and prime ministers urging him to work for the release of all political prisoners in Burma by the end of the year.

Ban said since the last meeting: "I sense not only a higher expectation but also a growing frustration that our efforts have yet to yield the results we all hope for. I share this sense of expectation and frustration."

Referring to a statement from the Burmese government that cooperation with the UN is a cornerstone of their foreign policy, he said: "We welcome it, and we look forward to continue, and we expect a concrete action by them to implement their commitment."

Giving a sense of the discussions during the meeting, Ban said: "I have taken note of the group's concern that recent actions by the Government of Myanmar risk undermining the prospects of inclusive national reconciliation, democratic transition, and respect for human rights, and more generally at the lack of sufficient response to the concerns of the United Nations and the international community."

The secretary-general urged the Burmese junta to "respond positively without further delay" to specific UN suggestions, as endorsed by the Group of Friends, in particular the release of all political prisoners, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and the initiation of a genuine dialogue with the opposition.

Ban reiterated that he would visit Burma only if there is a real expectation of tangible progress.

"I am ready to visit Myanmar again, to continue our consultations on various issues—humanitarian issues, and also political issues," he said. "At this time, I do not think that the atmosphere is ripe for me to undertake my own visit there.

"But I am committed, and I am ready to visit any time when I can have reasonable expectations my visit will be productive and meaningful," he said.

[UN boss rejects Burma visit plea](#)

BBC News - 2008/12/06 01:50:26 GMT

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has expressed frustration at the lack of democratic reform in Burma and says now is not the time for another visit.

In a letter to Mr Ban, 112 ex-leaders of various countries urged him to go there to push for the release of Burma's political prisoners.

He said he would go when there were "reasonable expectations" a visit would be "productive and meaningful".

Burma has arrested hundreds of dissidents this year.

The letter, sent on Wednesday, was signed by ex-leaders including ex-US presidents George Bush and Jimmy Carter, and former UK prime ministers Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher.

It called for the release of 2,100 political prisoners.

It said: "We urge you to make it clear that all political prisoners in Burma must be released by the end of this year, regardless of whether you travel to Burma.

"If the Burmese junta continues to defy the United Nations by refusing to make these releases by the end of the year, we urge you to encourage the Security Council to take further concrete action to implement its call for the release of all political prisoners."

But Mr Ban, speaking to reporters at the United Nations on Friday, said: "As I have said repeatedly, I am ready to visit Myanmar [Burma] again, to continue our consultations on various issues - humanitarian issues, and also political issues.

"At this time I do not think that the atmosphere is ripe for me to undertake my own visit there.

"But I am committed, and I am ready to visit any time, whenever I can have reasonable expectations of my visit, to be productive and meaningful.

The pressure on Mr Ban was led by Norway's former prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, who wanted him to enforce the Security Council's call in October 2007 for Burma to release the prisoners, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

It was released by Mr Bondevik's Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights and by a Washington area-based advocacy group, Freedom Now.

Mr Ban did visit Burma in May after Cyclone Nargis hit.

Burma has been criticised by human rights groups for its suppression of pro-democracy activists last year.

The UN issued a statement calling for democratic reforms following last year's protests, but Burma has continued its crackdown. Last month some dissidents were sentenced to 65 years in jail.

The most prominent political prisoner is National League for Democracy leader Ms Suu Kyi, who has been in jail or under house arrest for most of the last 19 years.

UN Chief Will Visit Burma Again, Only when Conditions Right

VOA - 6 December 2008

By Margaret Besheer, United Nations

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has expressed growing frustration with the military government in Burma, calling once again on its leadership to release all political prisoners and start a genuine dialogue with the opposition. The secretary-general convened a meeting late Friday with representatives from numerous countries that make up his friends on Myanmar group. Myanmar is the other name by which Burma is known.

He said since the group last met in September, there is a growing frustration among himself and members that their efforts have yet to yield results. "The government of Myanmar has officially declared that cooperation with the United Nations is a cornerstone of their foreign policy. We welcome it and we look forward to continue and expect concrete action by them to implement their commitment."

The group's meeting comes days after 112 former presidents and prime ministers from around the world sent a letter to the U.N. chief urging him to travel to Burma to secure the release of all political prisoners before the end of this year.

Human rights groups say there are more than two thousand prisoners of conscience in Burmese jails.

Mr. Ban told reporters following the closed-door session, that while he is ready to return to Burma to continue talks with the leadership on humanitarian and political issues, the timing would have to be right. "At this time it is not the right atmosphere for me to undertake my own visit there. But I am committed and ready to visit any time whenever I can have reasonable expectations of my visit to be productive and meaningful."

Mr. Ban visited Burma and met with top leaders after Cyclone Nargis devastated the country in May. His special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, has made four visits to that country in the last year. His last trip was widely criticized for not achieving any gains.

The secretary-general called on all countries that have influence with the government in Burma to use it to urge the government to honor its commitments.

Myanmar strives to reduce malaria victims by half in 2010

Xinhua - 2008-12-09 10:57:40

YANGON -- Myanmar is striving to cut the number of deaths caused by malaria by half in the year 2010 in the wake of that about 700,000 people in the country are infected with the disease yearly, the official newspaper New Light of Myanmar reported Tuesday.

To realize the target, the health authorities are calling for preventive measures against the fatal disease with the participation of the entire people and also with a high level of health awareness.

The preventive measures are outlined as imparting knowledge to the people, using mosquito nets treated with insecticide, cultivating the habit of visiting hospitals and receiving proper treatment.

Malaria is among the three diseases of national concern which Myanmar has been encountering. The other two are HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB).

Myanmar treats the three diseases as priority with the main objectives of reducing the morbidity and mortality in a bid to become no longer a public problem and meet the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations.

[UNICEF to build disaster-resistant schools in Myanmar](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-08

YANGON -- The United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF) will build seven quake and storm resistant schools in Myanmar's cyclone-hit regions to enable students to pursue education in a safe environment in case of disaster, the local Modern weekly journal reported Monday.

International professional architects will design for such schools equipped with health care and education services and be built by local engineers, the report said, quoting the UN organization.

The quake and storm resistant schools will also provide shelter for local people when meeting with disaster, the sources added.

According to earlier local reports, the UNICEF also planned to open at least 100 amusement centers for survived children in Myanmar's two cyclone-hard-hit divisions.

Secured environment will be selected for the location of the amusement centers in Ayeyawaddy and Yangon divisions, which will be managed by, aid workers and respective village dignitaries, the report said.

There were 51 children amusement facilities in the two divisions, of which some were closed after storm.

According to the report, the UNICEF has helped establish information center in Laputta, one of the hardest-hit townships in the Ayeyawaddy delta, and find 428 missing people with 15 family members getting reunified with them.

Meanwhile, two orphanages in Phyapon and Laputta in the delta region were also covered by the UNICEF to each house 300 orphans.

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

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

[Myanmar, India to trade in euros, Singapore dollars](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-08 21:37:44

YANGON, Dec. 8 -- Myanmar and India will use euros and Singapore dollars in direct trade transactions as an alternative means to settle credit accounts between the banks of India and Myanmar when Myanmar is under United States' financial sanctions, the Myanmar Times, one of the leading local weekly reported Monday.

Quoting the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the report said payments for bilateral trade will be conducted through the United Bank of India and three state-run Myanmar banks -- Myanmar Investment and Commerce Bank, Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank and Myanmar Economic Bank.

Myanmar exported 1.34 million tons of various beans and pulses to India in the fiscal year 2007-08 which ended in March, earning about 700 million dollars, official statistics show.

The majority of these beans and pulses were exported to India through Singapore dealers to settle the letters of credit account in US dollars owing to the US trade sanctions.

Last month, the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the State Trading Corporation of India agreed to maintain regular trade deal on beans and pulses with the Indian side proposing to purchase Myanmar quality beans and pulses at international current prices on a monthly basis.

India stands as Myanmar's second largest export market after Thailand and the fourth largest trading partner after Thailand, China and Singapore.

Myanmar-India bilateral trade reached 995 million U.S. dollars in the fiscal year of 2007-08 with Myanmar's exports to India accounting for 810 million dollars while its imports stood 185 million dollars, registering a trade surplus of 625 million dollars.

The Myanmar compiled figures also show that India's contracted investment in Myanmar reached 219.57 million U.S. dollars as of June 2008, of which 137 million were drawn into the oil and gas sector in September last year.

[WFP resumes buying local rice in Burma](#)

Mizzima - Monday, 08 December 2008 21:36

by Solomon

New Delhi - After nearly six months of restrictions, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) is recommencing the local purchase of rice in Burma to use in support of relief efforts for cyclone victims in the country's coastal regions of Rangoon and Irrawaddy Divisions.

Chris Kaye, Country Director of the WFP in Burma, told Mizzima in an email message that Burma's military government had informed the WFP that it could again purchase local rice after the organization was forced to stop buying locally in early June.

"The message [permission] was conveyed by the Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation during a meeting with our Deputy Executive Director at our HQ in Rome on 21st November," Kaye said in his correspondence.

He went on to say the WFP has since begun purchasing rice locally and supplying it to cyclone victims, a program that is scheduled to continue until the end of April 2009.

Kaye said the permission has saved "time and money. Imported rice is more expensive and takes longer to get into the hands and mouths of people who need it. It can take several weeks to procure rice from overseas and have that rice shipped to Myanmar [Burma]."

WFP was officially requested to stop buying rice locally by the government on June 11, and since then has been importing rice from India and Thailand to be supplied to cyclone victims.

A source in the military establishment told Mizzima in June that the government had stopped WFP from purchasing rice locally as it could lead to food shortage that might in turn result in hikes in overall commodity prices.

"The government feared that a rise in prices might instigate agitation among the people and result in civil unrest like that of August and September 2007," the source said.

Kaye explained that the government's request to stop purchasing rice locally was in view of the "potential risk at that time of a reduced harvest and the impact our purchases would have on prices in other parts of the country."

He said WFP stopped the purchase to make sure that its purchases would not have a negative impact on the food security of the country.

The source, however, said the Burmese government, after calculating that it could stabilize food security, was again permitting the WFP to purchase rice locally.

"The government thinks that it can now ensure that WFP's purchasing will not destabilize the overall price of commodities, that's why they are again allowing the purchasing of local rice," the source, who wished not to be named, added.

[Win Tin, Khin Maung Swe to be members of CRPP](#)

Mizzima - Friday, 05 December 2008 23:24

by Solomon

New Delhi (Mizzima) – Win Tin and Khin Maung Swe, two veteran politicians were included on Thursday as members of the central committee of the Committee Representing People's Parliament, a political alliance formed with members of parliament elected in 1990.

Veteran journalist and politician Win Tin and Khin Maung Swe, Member of Parliament elected from Sanchuang Township in Rangoon, were arrested and detained in prison for a long time and were released on September 23.

"We believe we can strengthen the CRPP given their political experience and skill because they are NLD's CEC members and involved actively in political movements," Aye Thar Aung, secretary of the CRPP said.

The CRPP was formed in September 1998 with several political parties including detained Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and ethnic parties such as the Shan National League for Democracy, and the Zomi National Congress.

The alliance, since its formation, had repeatedly urged the junta to allow the 1990 elected MPs to convene Parliament and demanded the release of political prisoners including the Aung San Suu Kyi, Win Tin, and Khin Maung Swe.

Both Win Tin and Khin Maung Swe, since their release from prison have not taken active political roles though they agreed to serve as central executive committee members of the NLD.

"They both agreed to involve themselves actively in the group [CRPP]," Aye Thar Aung said.

However, currently Win Tin is admitted to the Yangon Medical Centre in Rangoon and is undergoing medical tests after doctors found that his heart is weak.

A nurse at the clinic told Mizzima that doctors are taking an X-ray of his chest and the result will be revealed soon. She added that he has diabetes, asthma and his heart is weak.

Win Tin, the veteran journalist, during his 19 years in prison, had time and again suffered from ailments and close friends said his health deteriorated as the prison authorities failed to provide him proper medication.

But after his release, he told Mizzima, "I must engage in politics anyway. I must do as much as I can to achieve restoration and promotion of democracy to some extent."

[Asean engagement continues](#)

Straits Times - Dec 5, 2008

By Lee Seok Hwai THE United States' policy of intensive engagement with South-east Asia will likely continue under the Obama administration, the US envoy to Asean said yesterday, despite persistent concerns about Myanmar.

'There has been, for years, strong bipartisan support for intensive US engagement in South-east Asia and with Asean. I don't see any signs that that would change,' Mr Scot Marciel told The Straits Times in an interview yesterday.

Mr Marciel, who is also Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South-east Asia since June last year, pointed out that the US-Asean relationship has made significant strides in the past eight years under President George W. Bush.

'Business investment, trade, education cooperation, cooperation on the environment, health care - it's expanding in all those areas,' he said.

For example, two-way trade rose to US\$172 billion (S\$263.8 billion) last year from US\$120 billion in 1997. Asean has become the US' fourth-largest export market.

In non-economic spheres, the US helps Asean in areas from wildlife conservation to fighting terrorism by providing training and funding.

After Myanmar was devastated by Cyclone Nargis earlier this year, the US also worked very closely with Asean to help the impoverished country, providing more than US\$50 million in aid so far, Mr Marciel noted.

Indeed, his own appointment in April as the first US Ambassador to Asean attests to the close partnership. The US is the first country among Asean's 10 dialogue partners to assign a permanent representative to the bloc.

Since taking on the job, Mr Marciel, a 49-year-old career diplomat, said he has visited the region once every six weeks on average. In September alone, he was in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

He is in Singapore this week to meet his Asean counterparts at twice-yearly discussions on areas of cooperation, called the Informal Coordinating Mechanism.

Despite such firm bonds, one issue continues to be a sticking point in Asean-US relations: Myanmar.

Mr Marciel yesterday said the junta's recent arrest of more than 100 of its critics, and the long jail terms meted out to some of them, were a 'very negative' development. He urged Asean to take action under the new Asean Charter.

The charter, which has been ratified by all 10 Asean member nations, commits the countries to uphold democracy and human rights.

But the US envoy said the group has so far done nothing about the latest political suppression in Myanmar.

'You set out these ambitious goals, you created these standards in the charter but...I think it's a major issue for Asean that one of its members is blatantly violating the fundamental rules of the charter, and so far Asean has been quiet about it,' Mr Marciel said, adding that he would raise the subject with his Asean colleagues.

Thailand's political upheaval and the simmering border spat between Thailand and Cambodia, although described by Mr Marciel as internal disputes, add to the challenges facing the region.

Asean needs to find a way to deal with them or risk losing its relevance, said the American envoy, especially when compared to other existing or proposed regional architecture, such as an Asia-Pacific Community mooted by Australian leader Kevin Rudd.

'Its going to take tremendous political will to move ahead,' Mr Marciel said.

'My role is to remind Asean of the goals that it set for itself and to see if we can find ways to encourage the progress.'

Price of Burmese Mobiles Slashed, but Call Charges Soar

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 8, 2008

By MIN LWIN, Central Marketing Company, an affiliate of Htoo Trading Company, is set to launch a new service that will make SIM cards for GSM mobile phones more accessible, but also much more expensive to use.

The service, which will become available from December 12 on a trial basis, is being offered in collaboration with the state-owned Myanmar Post and Telecommunications (MPT). It will initially target foreign residents and tourists, according to business sources in Rangoon.

A source at Htoo Trading Company said that two types of cards will be made available—cards costing 20 FEC (officially equivalent to US \$20), which must be used within four weeks, and 10-FEC cards valid for just two weeks.

This contrasts with the official license fee of 1.55 million kyat (\$1,240) currently charged by MPT. However, the cost of placing a domestic call will rise dramatically, from 25 kyat (around \$0.02) to 350 kyat (\$0.30).

"It's good to hear that the GSM phone SIM cards are cheaper, but at 350 kyat per minute, the charge for making local calls is too high," said the owner of a shop selling mobile phones in Rangoon's Yuzana shopping center.

Another factor that is likely to limit the market for the new service is the fact that it will only be available at hotels run by Tay Za, the owner of Htoo Trading Company and a close crony of the country's military leader, Snr-Gen Than Shwe.

"The hotels and resorts will also offer to sell handsets to customers who want to buy the new SIM cards," said the source at Htoo Trading.

Business sources in Rangoon said that Tay Za had reached an agreement with the Burmese regime that put him in a position to dominate the telecommunications sector through his effective control of the lucrative GSM mobile phone market.

Htoo Trading Company already plays a major role in the Burmese economy. The company's business activities range from logging, tourism, hotels, air transport and construction to technological investment in Yadanabon Cyber City in Mandalay.

GSM mobile phones have become an important communications tool in Burma, where there are now more than 200,000 GSM subscribers, according to MPT, which introduced the service in 2002.

Doctor visits Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi: witnesses

AFP - 4 November 2008

YANGON — A doctor visited Myanmar's detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Thursday, witnesses said, three months after her refusal of food supplies sparked concerns.

Her regular doctor Tin Myo Win and his assistant went into the lakeside compound where Aung San Suu Kyi is detained in the early afternoon and stayed about four hours, witnesses near her Yangon home told AFP.

A spokesman for her National League for Democracy party said she was expected to receive a routine medical check-up, a month after the doctor's last visit.

NLD spokesman Nyan Win previously said that Aung San Suu Kyi was given a clean bill of health after the doctor's visit in October.

Tin Myo Win gave Aung San Suu Kyi an intravenous drip on September 14, about a month after she began refusing food rations delivered to her home, prompting her lawyer Kyi Win to describe her as "malnourished."

The NLD and Kyi Win always denied the 63-year-old was on hunger strike, but said she was only eating small amounts of food to call for greater human rights in Myanmar and to protest her detention.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who has no other source of food aside from the daily supplies provided by the military regime, started accepting the food rations again a few days after being given the drip.

The Nobel peace prize winner had been detained for most of the past two decades. She is kept mostly isolated from the outside world, only receiving occasional visits from her doctor and lawyer.

Nyan Win said Aung San Suu Kyi's lawyer had requested a meeting with her to discuss an appeal against her detention.

"Lawyer U Kyi Win asked the authorities this week to meet with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi for her legal appeal. We are hoping to meet her. But we haven't got any reply yet," Nyan Win told AFP.

The NLD won a landslide victory in a 1990 election but the military never allowed it to take office and instead cemented its decades-long grip on power.

[Chinese, Myanmar FMs hold talks in Myanmar new capital](#)

Xinhua - 2008-12-04 22:14:16

NAY PYI TAW, Myanmar -- Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and his Myanmar counterpart U Nyan Win held talks in Myanmar's new capital of Nay Pyi Taw Thursday.

Yang said the development trend of China-Myanmar relations is currently good with the two countries keeping in touch at high level and continuously making progress in the cooperation in all sectors.

Yang expressed China's thanks to Myanmar for its support rendered to China in the quake relief efforts and Beijing Olympic Games.

He stressed that the Chinese government highly appreciated the relations with Myanmar and will adopt the policy of having good relations and partnership with neighboring countries in continuously pushing ahead the China-Myanmar good neighborly ties on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.

At the meeting, U Nyan Win said the frequent exchange of visits at high level has strongly enhanced the development of the bilateral ties.

He expressed Myanmar's thanks to China for its prompt assistance provided for the cyclone relief of Myanmar.

He maintained that Myanmar has as always abide by the one-China policy and will continue to firmly support China on the issue of Taiwan and that dealing with Tibet.

The two sides unanimously agreed that the foreign ministries of the two countries will keep frequent access and consultation and timely exchange views on bilateral ties and issues of common concern.

The two sides will, in the sector of economic and trade cooperation, actively push the cooperation projects already coordinated and expand the new form of cooperation and new areas as well as raise the level of cooperation.

The two sides also agreed that the Chinese side will support Myanmar's post-storm reconstruction work, closely coordinate and further implement the aid projects extended by the Chinese side and enhance cooperation in joint combat of cross-border offenses such as drug trafficking.

U Nyan Win also briefed Myanmar's domestic political and economic situation, saying that the Myanmar government would continue its efforts in pushing the democratic process and economic development.

Yang expressed China's sincere hope and support Myanmar's political stability, national reconciliation, economic development and social harmony, assuring to render assistance for Myanmar's national construction as much as possible.

The Chinese foreign minister arrived Nay Pyi Taw earlier on Thursday on a two-day visit to Myanmar.

Veteran journalist-politician Win Tin hospitalized

Mizzima - Friday, 05 December 2008 13:51

by Solomon

New Delhi - Veteran journalist and politician U Win Tin, released from prison after nearly two decades, was hospitalized at the Yangon Medical Centre (YMC) on Thursday after his health deteriorated and he was too weak to function normally, a nurse at the clinic said.

"We found his heart weak and he was unable to function normally. It could be dangerous for him, so he is being admitted and we are diagnosing his illness," the nurse told Mizzima over telephone.

Hla Oo, son of Win Tin's friend Maung Maung Khin, at whose house the veteran politician has been putting up since his release, said they rushed him to hospital when they found that he was coughing continuously and finding it difficult to breathe. He is 79.

The nurse said they are worried that there could be some infection in his lungs and an X-ray of the chest will be done today to determine the problem.

"We will know the result of the diagnosis by this [Friday] evening," the nurse said. U Win Tin, whose health began deteriorating during his overly long stay in prison, is suffering from diabetes and cardiac problems and coughs constantly, which is why Hla Oo said they took him to the clinic.

Win Tin, who was among the founders of the National League for Democracy, was arrested in 1989 and served a total of 19 years in prison. He was released on September 23, 2008.

Win Tin is also said to have served as a special adviser to the detained Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi before his arrest.

NEWS ANALYSIS: Burmese Try to Anticipate Junta's Next Election Move

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 4, 2008

By WAI MOE

As 2008 approaches its end, there is growing speculation about the forthcoming 2010 election in Rangoon and other cities around Burma, despite the fact that the country's ruling junta has yet to announce any details about when precisely it will be held.

So far, the junta has not issued any decrees relating to the election, although some government officials and members of the military-backed mass organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), have suggested that an election law could be promulgated by the end of this year or early next year.

In a speech delivered at the closing ceremony of the USDA's 15th annual meeting, held last week, Snr-Gen Than Shwe, chairman of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), expressed confidence that the election would go according to plan, but offered no specifics.

"The most crucial step for democratic transition has been implemented successfully due largely to the public support," Than Shwe said, referring to a referendum held in May on a constitution that the regime took 14 years to draft.

He added that "plans are well under way to see to the remaining steps, including the 2010 transition work program."

According to political observers in Rangoon who spoke to *The Irrawaddy* recently, however, the junta is in no hurry to set a date for the upcoming election, which would be officially announced in a decree signed by Than Shwe.

"I heard from authorities that the election law will be announced next June," said Ohn Maung, a veteran politician in Rangoon.

Political analysts based in Burma and abroad said they thought the junta would surprise people by announcing the election law and timetable at an unexpected time. They added that the campaign period would likely be much shorter than in 1990, when the military-backed party lost by a landslide.

One Burmese scholar suggested that the junta might follow the example of Singapore, where political parties get just three weeks to campaign for elections. In 1990, the campaign period was 90 days, and the timetable of the election was announced more than a year before it was held.

Analysts said that the SPDC would also take other steps to ensure that the outcome of the 1990 election is not repeated in 2010, including a requirement that parties participating in the election must contest at least half of the electoral seats. In 1990, any party that could field candidates for three electoral seats was entitled to run.

Even though the election law and date have not yet been officially announced, the authorities and USDA leaders are already preparing for the election, sources in Burma said.

Meanwhile, the regime is pushing to complete preparations for voter registration. On Thursday, the state-run *New Light of Myanmar* reported that Maj-Gen Saw Lwin, the minister for immigration and population, urged officials "to make efforts for timely completion of work for issuing Citizenship Scrutiny Cards."

The SPDC is also taking measures to ensure that it has enough money to cover the cost of a carefully orchestrated election.

According to a source close to the USDA, Minister of Industry (1) Aung Thaung, who is in charge of the USDA in Mandalay Division, recently held an auction of government-seized cars in Mandalay to raise funds for the election.

The junta has also recently called for the privatization of more than 30 state enterprises. Observers in Rangoon said that the privatization call could be part of the junta's fund-raising for the election.

"Top ruling generals are looking for alternative sources of election funding, because they don't want to touch government reserves at a time when the global financial meltdown is weakening the domestic economy," said a researcher in Rangoon.

Observers said that, unlike in 1990, the junta would not back a particular party in the forthcoming election, but would instead rely on the USDA, which was formed by Than Shwe in 1993, to deliver a more favorable outcome.

Meanwhile, Burma's opposition groups are also trying to prepare for the 2010 election.

The National League for Democracy (NLD), the victor in 1990, has been holding regular executive meetings to discuss the 2010 election. The party has also been meeting with ethnic parties to trade perspective on the election.

Khin Maung Swe, an NLD executive member, said the party has not yet declared whether it will participate in the election, adding that the decision would depend on the circumstances.

In a statement released on September 22, the party called for changes to the junta-backed constitution within six months. Burma's police chief, Brig-Gen Khin Yee, reportedly called on the NLD to withdraw the statement, but the party refused.

[COMMENTARY: The Drama of 2008](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 4, 2008

By KYAW ZWA MOE

Events in Burma during 2008 added up to a drama packed with mixed emotions. They began with an appalling disaster, arousing sympathy and anger, and ended with frustration as the year approached its end. Out of the drama, however, lessons can be learnt for the year ahead by all those involved, from the average Burmese citizen to national and international leaders, by organizations of all kinds, global and local alike.

The year 2008 was scarcely four months old when immense misfortune hit this beautiful but economically battered and politically stalled country. Cyclone Nargis swept in from the Bay of Bengal, killing about 140,000 people and leaving some two million homeless and bereft of their livelihoods. The world watched with horror—but this was just the first act of the drama.

The international community responded with immediate offers of assistance, but governments and relief agencies hadn't reckoned with the callousness of a suspicious regime, which at first barred aid organizations and workers from entering the country before eventually allowing them in under tight restrictions.

An angry but impotent world watched helplessly as the cyclone victims struggled to survive, neglected by their own government. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd spoke for many world leaders when he said: "The Burmese regime is behaving appallingly."

Even when US, British and French ships loaded with thousands of tons of relief supplies sailed to the region, the Burmese government banned them from landing emergency aid that would have saved an unknown number of lives. Frustration grew as helicopters sat on ships' decks just half an hour flight from starving communities, and some foreign government members, led by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, called for the employment of a little-known UN principle, the "responsibility to protect" (known as "R2P"), allowing outside intervention in situations where a national government is unable or unwilling to protect its people.

While the world dithered, cyclone victims suffered and died, and finally the fleet of foreign relief ships withdrew and the regime was able to report that all had returned to "normalcy." Faced with growing international pressure, the regime did, however, agree to allow relief flights to land, although tight restrictions were still imposed.

Much more important for the regime than the cyclone crisis was the smooth execution of its pet project—the national referendum on the draft constitution that had taken a convention of hand-picked delegates 14 years to draw up and which not even the worst natural disaster to hit the country in living memory was allowed to delay.

A UN demand for a review of the draft constitution by a special committee, to make sure it provided for an all-inclusive political process, was rejected by the regime. The result of the referendum was no surprise, and the outside world was asked to accept the absurd fiction that the draft constitution had been approved by more than 90 percent of the electorate.

Some consoled themselves with the belief that "something is better than nothing." Burma has lacked a constitution for the past 20 years, after its second post-independence charter was revoked at the time of the 1988 national uprising, and it was certainly time for a new one.

Like it or not, the people of Burma will have to live for now with this constitution, which won't be easy to review or amend. Its salient features are:

- The perpetuation of a leading political role for the military, with the commander in chief of the armed forces, currently the junta supremo Snr-Gen Than Shwe, entitled to fill 110 seats in the 440-seat parliament with appointees from the ranks of the armed forces. The commander in chief will occupy a political position on the same level as that of the two vice presidents. In the event of a "state of emergency," which the military can declare at any time, the commander in chief will assume full legislative, executive and judicial powers.
- No role for opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and limited participation by other veteran politicians and activists. Suu Kyi's exclusion is determined by a clause reading: "The President of the Union shall be a person who has been residing continuously in the country for at least 20 years up to the time of the election and the President of the Union himself, parents, spouse, children and their spouses shall not owe allegiance to a foreign power, shall not be a subject of a foreign power or citizen of a foreign country. They shall not be persons entitled to the rights and privileges of a subject or citizen of a foreign country." As the widow of a British scholar and mother of two sons who are not Burmese citizens, Suu Kyi is, therefore, barred from any leadership role. The same applies to political exiles who have lived outside the country since 1988.

- The inviolability of the constitution is guaranteed by its Chapter 12 which states that any amendment requires the approval of more than 75 percent of all members of parliament. Since 25 percent of the parliament will be made up of military appointees, the constitution is as good as cast in stone.

Under these conditions, only a massive uprising on the scale of the 1988 turmoil could lead to changes in the constitution. With the country now in the grip of a regime determined to eliminate all opposition to its rule, this is highly unlikely to happen.

Frustration with military rule is still very evident, however. Suu Kyi's unprecedented refusal to meet UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari during his last trip to Burma in August was evidence of this.

The failure of Gambari's repeated missions to Burma should lead the UN to do some serious soul-searching. It should at least ensure that its envoys aren't exploited by the regime or even negotiate with the generals without the promise of some tangible result.

The UN's future role in the Burma question will amount to nothing as long as it lacks the capability to convince all key players to play their roles effectively. That means the Burmese government and opposition groups, regional players such as China, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and—on the wider international stage—the US, EU and the UN Security Council (UNSC). It won't be an easy task. But nothing is impossible.

World politics have had a big impact on the Burma issue.

The UNSC issued its first presidential statement on Burma in October 2007 in an attempt to pressure the Burmese generals to enter a dialogue with the opposition.

In May this year, the UNSC issued another presidential statement, toned down because of opposition by China and Russia to some of the wording. The three authors of the resolution—the US, France and Britain—not only had to water down their original draft but they also had to delete a demand for the release of all political prisoners, including Suu Kyi. In an attempt to persuade the 15-member council to approve the presidential statement, the three Western powers were also forced to scrap the portion which urged the junta to take tangible and timely steps towards a genuine dialogue.

Chinese and Russian support within the UNSC also ensured that Burma avoided total isolation in the world community.

In October, Foreign Minister Nyan Win visited North Korea and met his counterpart, Pak Ui Chun, in Pyongyang, a significant encounter following the resumption of diplomatic ties ruptured in 1983 when North Korean agents plotted to assassinate the then South Korean president in Rangoon.

The world's divided approach to Burma has emboldened the regime to resist international demands for political change and to challenge the Western powers, including the US. The question is how much those powers are interested in getting directly involved in the issue.

In November, outgoing US President George W Bush appointed Michael J Green as the special representative and policy coordinator for Burma with rank of ambassador. Since the junta's brutal crackdown against the uprising in 1988, the US has lowered its official representation in Rangoon to the rank of chargé d'affaires.

Although the US is the world's staunchest supporter of Burma's pro-democracy movement and the strongest critic of the regime, the Burmese people realize that world politics don't favor drastic US action against their country's leaders. But, like a drowning man clutching at a straw, most Burmese still hope for a real change-oriented policy by the international community led by the US.

They ask whether the "change" promised by US President-elect Barack Obama means anything for the Burmese people. Will a "changed" foreign policy mean more than remaining a staunch supporter of the pro-democracy movement and the strongest critic of the regime?

The Burmese appreciate the US stand, but many realize that they can expect little more. They haven't lost all hope, however, and feel a resolution of the political stalemate could yet come. The resolution could materialize from a greater engagement by the US and other Western powers alongside China, India and Asean.

Burma signed an Asean human rights charter in July, but already the regime has blatantly breached it by hauling more than 150 activists—including monks, journalists, lawyers and volunteer relief workers—before kangaroo courts, which have been handing out sentences of unbelievable severity—up to 65 years imprisonment for leaders of the 88 Students Generation group.

Asean's political culture and deeply-rooted non-interference policy appeared to combine to allow these monstrous acts by a member state.

Despite Asean's stand on non-interference, differences between East and West or between governments which advocate sanctions and those which favor engagement must be bridged. The differences can only serve to maintain Burma's status quo, and nobody benefits except the country's rulers.

The US, other Western nations, the EU, China, India and Asean must take a united approach, based on one common strategy, including the appointment of an ambassador to Burma possessing a powerful mandate from the whole international community.

The aim will not be to remove the regime, but to get it to work together with all opposition parties, ethnic groups and the international community in a combined effort to break the deadlock.

Burma's opposition groups are not talking about regime change. They are calling for reconciliation. Pragmatists recognize that the role of the military will have to be accepted in the future political structure of the country—although it will have to be different from what is envisaged in the constitution.

History has shown that Burma's military leaders possess no will for reconciliation or collaboration with the outside world. Rewards and punishment will have to be employed to bring them to their senses.

There must be a will for national reconciliation, the relief of the economic and political suffering inflicting the Burmese people and the release of all political prisoners.

The achievement of this dream belongs in the hands of a new united front of all domestic and international parties. With a combined policy of a united world, this mission can be accomplished. It will be much more than just difficult—but nothing is impossible.

Burma's drama has by no means ended, and it's still uncertain whether its finale will be tragic or happy.

[Ban Rules Out Visit to Burma](#)

Irrawaddy - Thursday, December 4, 2008

By LALIT K JHA

NEW YORK — The UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, on Wednesday ruled out a visit to Burma until such time as he is assured that his presence in the country will help to move it closer to the goal of establishing a genuine democracy.

The onus for this lies on the Burmese military junta, said Ban's spokesperson, Michele Montas.

"The secretary-general has consistently said that the primary responsibility lies with the government to deliver substantive results, including freeing political prisoners and including having a dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi," Montas said.

The spokesperson confirmed that the secretary-general has received a letter from more than 100 former prime ministers and presidents from over 50 countries, urging him to press for the release of political prisoners before the end of the year.

Ban also received a phone call from the former prime minister of Norway, Kjell Magne Bondevik, who had taken the lead in bringing the former world leaders together on one platform.

"They discussed the letter, asking the secretary-general to visit Myanmar [Burma] and to urge the release of political prisoners by the end of this year," Montas said, adding: "The secretary-general once more reiterated his pledge to remain fully engaged, both personally and through his personal envoy in Myanmar."

Ban said he would like to visit Burma again to discuss a broad range of issues.

"However, he will not be able to do so without reasonable expectations of a meaningful outcome, which is what we have been saying all along," Montas said.

Montas also said that Ban's special envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, would not visit Burma unless he too was sure of achieving some tangible results.

"Gambari himself will not go unless there is some chance that this will move forward. He will not just go for the sake of going, in other words," the spokesperson said.

Meanwhile, having guided America's foreign policy on Burma during the last eight years, the US first lady, Laura Bush, said on Wednesday that she would continue to raise her voice on behalf of the people of Burma even after she leaves the White House on January 20.

"I will continue that," Bush said in an interview with CNN on Wednesday.

"The president is going to build a Freedom Institute with his presidential library, and so it'll be a really good vehicle for me, as well, to continue to talk about Burma, to meet with dissidents from Burma like the young Buddhist monk that I had the chance to meet with when we were in New York earlier this fall," she said.

Inspired by Aung San Suu Kyi, the pro-democracy icon, Bush has been instrumental in pushing for US sanctions against the Burmese military junta and its cronies. The US has led the world in initiating action against the Burmese regime.

Bush, who has met with a number of Burmese pro-democracy leaders, is often the first internationally recognized figure to issue statements on issues related to Burma.

[Burma's jailed hip hop singers shifted to remote prisons](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 03 December 2008 22:20

New Delhi – At least four political prisoners including popular hip hop singer Zeya Thaw and his three colleagues were shifted to remote prisons in the country by a vindictive Burmese military junta on Wednesday, sources said.

Zeya Thaw, (27), who was sentenced to six years in prison in November, was transferred from Rangoon's Insein prison to Kawthaung prison in Burma's southern most division of Tanessarim, according to, one of his colleagues.

He was arrested in March, for being involved in anti-junta protests last year and was charged for possessing foreign currency and hobnobbing with illegal organizations.

Much in the same way, his colleagues Aung Zay Phyoo was moved to Taungoo prison in Pegu division, Thiha Win Tin was sent to Nyaung-U prison in Mandalay division, and Arkar Bo to Kyauk Phyu prison in Arakan state, the colleague told Mizzima.

Zeya Thaw, along with his colleagues in 2000 formed a hip hop boy's band called the 'Acid' and first introduced rap music in Burma. He became involved in politics after the September 2007 mass protests and formed an activists group the 'Generation Wave'.

Shifting political prisoners on Wednesday from Insein prison to remote jails across the country is a continuation of the process of a series of prison transfers being resorted to since last month.

The current crop of Burmese military dictators, who have maintained their stranglehold on power for 20 years since 1988, over the last two months have handed down appallingly long prison terms to political activists, whom they arrested after the 2007 monk-led demonstrations.

[Burmese comedian & blogger nominated for RSF award](#)

Mizzima - Wednesday, 03 December 2008 21:38

by Zarni

Chiang Mai - Famous comedian and film director Zargarnar and blogger Nay Phone Latt from Burma, both sentenced to lengthy prison terms, by the junta have been nominated for the Reporters Without Frontiers "Cyber-Dissident or Blogger" Award by the Paris-based media watchdog group.

The Burmese comedian and blogger are among 10 nominees named by the RSF for the award, which honours bloggers and cyber dissidents who through their work, their principled stand or their attitude have displayed support for freedom of information.

"They [Zargarnar & Nay Phone Latt] are in the list of nominees as they are very active in trying to get the information both for their own people in Burma and for the people outside of the country on the situation in the country especially during the events in September and also the Nargis Cyclone," Vicent Brossel, RSF's Asia-Pacific spokesperson told Mizzima.

The RSF Award, which has been honouring journalists since 1992, will be announced on December 4, after a panel of 35 senior editors and journalists decide on the winners.

The award will be presented by Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi at a ceremony in Paris on Thursday.

Nay Phone Latt, who owned at least three cyber cafés, was arrested by the Burmese authorities for posting information about the September 2007 protests on his personal website and was sentenced to 20 years in prison and was transferred to Paan prison in Karen state.

Similarly, Zargarnar (alias) Thura was sentenced to 59 years in prison after he was arrested for providing information to journalists and media groups outside the country.

The Burmese comedian was also awarded the 'One Humanity Award' by Canada-based PEN, the New York-based Human Rights Watch's 'Dashiel Hammett Award' and the London-based ArtVenture's 'Freedom to Create' award.

In 2007, the Oslo-based Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), was named winner of the RSF's 'media' award, which honours media outlets that symbolise the battle for the right to inform the public and people's right to be kept informed of events.

[Ex-world leaders urge U.N.'s Ban to go to Myanmar](#)

Reuters - Wed Dec 3, 2008 10:39am IST

By Patrick Worsnip

UNITED NATIONS - More than 100 former presidents and prime ministers from around the world wrote to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Wednesday urging him to go to Myanmar to press for the release of political prisoners.

In the letter, released by two human rights groups, 112 former leaders encouraged Ban to carry out a plan he has already floated of visiting the country, also known as Burma, before the end of December for his second trip this year.

Such a visit "would illustrate for the world whether or not the Burmese military regime is serious about making changes called for by the United Nations Security Council and your good offices," the letter said.

It said that since June 2007 the number of political prisoners in Myanmar, which has been ruled for more than four decades by the military, had risen to more than 2,100 from 1,200. The country's most famous detainee is Nobel peace laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Signatories of the letter included former U.S. Presidents George H.W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, former British Prime Ministers Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher and John Major and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The initiative was led by former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik. The letter was released by Bondevik's Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights and by Freedom Now.

Ban visited Myanmar in May to secure entry for aid workers after the country was struck by Cyclone Nargis. He has since said he would like to return to discuss political issues.

But diplomats say Ban is reluctant to visit again unless he is assured of a success such as a release of political prisoners, and that there is little sign the Myanmar junta would comply. Dozens more dissidents were jailed last month.

Several visits by a U.N. special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, have produced few results. But Wednesday's letter said Ban should go anyway.

"We urge you to make it clear that all political prisoners in Burma must be released by the end of this year, regardless of whether you travel to Burma," it said.

"If the Burmese junta continues to defy the United Nations by refusing to make these releases by the end of the year, we urge you to encourage the Security Council to take further concrete action to implement its call for the release of all political prisoners."

In October last year, the Security Council issued a statement demanding democratic reforms, including the release of political prisoners. But veto-holding China and Russia have prevented tougher action by the council.

"The Burmese people are counting on the United Nations to take the required action to achieve the breakthrough they desperately need to both restore democracy to their country and address the serious humanitarian and human rights challenges that they face," the letter said.

Burma - Bangladesh Border Trade Normalizes

Narinjara News - 12/3/2008

Teknaf: The border trade between Bangladesh and Burma has returned to normal with Burmese cargo boats entering Bangladesh's Teknaf Port after trade stopped for a month due to tension over a maritime boundary dispute.

A businessman from Teknaf told Narinjara News yesterday over the phone that the border trade is now normal and many cargo boats loaded with goods from throughout the coastal regions of Burma have entered Bangladesh since last week.

The Burmese exports, some legal and some not, include many raw materials such as timber, teak, rice, fish, and bamboo. These goods are exported to Bangladesh through the Teknaf border port situated on the Naff River opposite Burma's Maungdaw.

Bangladesh authorities opened a border entry point in Teknaf to promote trade with Burma.

Local people report that there are many Burmese goods exported to Bangladesh through the Teknaf Port, but some goods such as timber and teak are smuggled across because Burma does not allow their export to Bangladesh.

Burmese businessmen from Arakan export timber to Bangladesh through Teknaf with the help of local army authorities who take large bribes from the smugglers.

Bangladesh protects its own forest and does not allow timber production domestically, so it must import smuggled timber in order to meet the country's need.

In addition to the timber, cattle from Burma are also exported to Bangladesh through the trade point in hopes of high profits.

A broker from Shin Ma Pru Island also confirmed that many cattle from Rambree Island in Arakan are brought to Shin Ma Pru for export to Bangladesh.

Many other goods including shoes, slippers, umbrellas, dolls, Chinese-made batteries, longyi, makeup, and drugs are imported to Bangladesh from Burma, while Bangladesh exports such goods as fertilizers, cement, tin, and medicine via the border trade.

Burmese PM Says Jobs Aplenty for Returnees

Irrawaddy - Wednesday, December 3, 2008

By WAI MOE

Burma's Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein said that the country would not be affected by the global financial meltdown and insisted that there are plenty of jobs available for millions of Burmese who are currently working abroad if they are forced to return home, according to the state-run *Myanma Alin* newspaper on Tuesday.

The newspaper reported that Thein Sein, speaking at a meeting in the capital Naypyidaw to discuss development of the country's agricultural sector, said that the global financial crisis was "irrelevant" to Burma's economy.

Addressing concerns that the economic slowdown would result in massive unemployment among the estimated two million Burmese working outside the country, he said that there are plenty of opportunities awaiting them in Burma if they return.

Agricultural industries alone could absorb millions of workers, he said. He pointed to labor shortages in the country's palm-oil industry, which currently employs just 17,974 workers, and on rubber plantations, which have a workforce of around two million, as areas where many returnees could find employment.

He added that there was also a demand for workers in the forestry and fishery industries. He said that the country had the capacity to develop its economy on its own, despite the economic crisis and sanctions imposed by Western countries.

Despite his reassurances, however, business people in Burma say that decreasing demand for beans, pulses and rice from major trading partners, particularly China, India and Thailand, has hit the agricultural sector hard.

Even more significant, in terms of export earnings, is the energy sector. Last year, Thailand alone paid the Burmese junta at least US \$2.5 million for natural gas. Since October, however, the price of oil and natural gas has fallen by more than half, as demand shrinks in response to expectations of a prolonged recession.

According to a report on Burma published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) in November, the country's export revenues will suffer from the impact of the global slowdown in the year ahead.

"[T]he price of many of [Burma's] commodity exports is likely to weaken in 2009, as we expect global food prices to fall sharply before picking up in 2010," according to the EIU report.

A Rangoon-based economist, who spoke on condition of anonymity, rejected the regime's claims that Burma was insulated from the effects of the global downturn. He said that the country was not immune to the recession because its neighbors would be less likely to import from Burma until their own economies improved.

Aung Thu Nyein, a Burmese economic analyst based in Thailand, said that the loss of jobs by migrant workers would also have a severe impact on Burma's economy. Many who work abroad remit money to their families back in Burma, he said, and the loss of their income would definitely impact on the domestic economy.

He added that Burma's economy is fragile at the best of times, and that even a minor disruption could have a major impact.

According to the EIU, Burma's total international reserves in 2008 were US \$2.262 billion. But many are skeptical about how the ruling junta is using this money, as most Burmese survive on less than US \$1.20 a day.

[The future of Burma's nonviolent campaign for democracy](#)

DVB - Dec 2, 2008

Gemma Dursley

Since Burma's pro-democracy protests of 2007, many of those at the centre of the Saffron Uprising have been quietly jailed, and the optimism that many allowed themselves to embrace last September has quickly given way to the more familiar anger and frustration.

For some, these emotions have led to demands for a reappraisal of activist methods. The same despair that led many to hope for an unlikely Iraq-style invasion has caused some to question the wisdom of taking on the junta through nonviolent means. Since these have failed to bring change, and since the regime even dares to kill and imprison revered monks, then perhaps it is time to speak to the generals in a language they understand.

The dissatisfaction brought by failed uprisings and almost half a century of military rule is clearly understandable. However, strategy cannot be guided by emotion, and jettisoning a nonviolent struggle in favour of a violent one must be critically examined. So far this has not happened – articles and arguments on exile news websites have appeared to only address the morality of employing violence, without looking at what would be gained or lost by such an approach, and even whether it is possible.

Types of nonviolent resistance

This focus on whether violence is ethically right or not stems, I believe, from the failure to distinguish “strategic nonviolent resistance” from “principled nonviolence”. The Buddhist component of the pro-democracy movement in Burma often serves to fudge this distinction, yet it is crucial to understand the difference.

Strategic nonviolent resistance is a way of waging conflict against an opponent through mass civil disobedience and disruption. It includes a wide variety of tactics, such as strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, and the setting up of alternative institutions. Its effectiveness is unquestionable: academics at the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict have shown that nonviolent campaigns have been almost twice as effective as violent campaigns, while Freedom House reports that in the last 35 years, nonviolent struggle has accounted for the vast majority of victories for democratic movements.

While activists might embark on a nonviolent campaign due to its effectiveness, principled nonviolence finds its origins in religious and philosophical convictions that are devoid of political content. Despite much success, nonviolence still has connotations of pacifism and ‘doing nothing’. However, there is nothing passive about such resistance, no intention to make weaponry from compassion and love. It is a strategy which works by bringing massive disruption to the state.

Why nonviolent methods work

The Philippines' Marcos in the 80s, Indonesia's Suharto in the 90s, and authoritarian governments in Central and Eastern Europe in the early part of this decade, to name but a few, were all brought down by nonviolent movements. Memories of TV footage showing the vast multitudes involved in these revolutions indicate one particular reason why nonviolent campaigns are effective.

Nonviolent methods unite groups across the social spectrum, as do violent state reprisals against nonviolent campaigners. The peaceful nature of Burma's 2007 uprising made the junta's justifications for the crackdown appear absurd, and many Burmese who may once have viewed themselves as apolitical were suddenly politicised by the military's actions. Violent movements, however, are seen as ugly and extreme by many sections of the public, even if the violence might be morally justifiable, and participation is drastically reduced.

Nonviolent groups also receive widespread international support. An excess of suffering in the world means that international NGOs and, to some extent, governments, must pick and choose the causes they support. Although market metaphors might sound heartless, one factor giving the Burmese pro-democracy movement a higher value than other struggles is the nonviolent methods employed by the opposition. Violent opposition is hard for overseas groups to market to potential supporters. State

crushing of violent resistance elicits, if anything, only guarded international protest; firing on unarmed demonstrators, on the other hand, unites much of the world in condemnation.

Repressing nonviolent campaigns yields high costs within governments, as regime members find themselves in disagreement over the correct way to respond. Although the junta appears intact and unified today, we know that many in the army had, and still have, grave misgivings about violence meted out upon the protesters and the Sangha. Violent opposition elicits little if any understanding from government members. Officials are far more likely to switch their allegiance away from a regime if they are sure the resistance will not threaten their lives.

Failure in Burma

Despite these advantages, a frustrating lack of progress and a justifiable indignation towards a regime with no conscience tempts activists to countenance violence. If peaceful methods aren't yet working, then surely violent methods must be deployed.

But the wisdom of activists' choices can only be assessed by looking at the political context in which they are made, and the continuation of military rule has little or nothing to do with the pro-democracy movement choosing the wrong route to emancipation. Failure to bring change is due to the way structural conditions impede the collective action which effective resistance requires.

People don't naturally come together to rebel – they must be convinced to contribute to a movement, whether violent or nonviolent. Mobilising recruits needs, amongst other things, leadership and movement entrepreneurs, and organisation. However, these require a degree of structural space within which to operate. Such room is denied by the junta's repressive machinery, which deals in the surveillance, harassment, assault and detention of anyone trying to mobilise resistance.

A legal system which fails to provide or protect political and civil rights means that association and communication between activists is strictly curtailed. This makes disunity among opposition groups difficult to overcome, and leads to a lack of imagination and coordination. Even the sole legal opposition organisation struggles to exist. Any would-be political entrepreneurs thus face enormous difficulties, whether they are committed to a violent or a nonviolent approach, and a fractured opposition is not going to tempt regime members to switch loyalties. The problem, in short, is not the content of the strategy, but the near impossibility of devising and executing any strategy.

The current political situation makes surrender to the most immediately satisfying 'solution' very tempting. Diplomatic efforts to improve the stalemate proceed at a snail's pace; meanwhile, prisons are filling up with political detainees, and one-sided political violence intensifies. Frustration and tiredness pervade activist circles, and 'an eye for an eye' can rejuvenate and motivate some.

Yet it is crucial to understand that any attempt at violent resistance would run into the same obstacles that impede nonviolent action, while possessing none of the advantages of the latter. Instead of allowing themselves to be led by the military into a futile armed confrontation, activists should concentrate on circumventing the obstacles to collective action imposed by the junta, presenting a coherent and united movement for change, and maintaining a commitment to nonviolent methods.

This is the fourth in a series of articles by Gemma Dursley for DVB on Burma's collective action problem.

[European envoy urges Myanmar opposition to contest polls – Summary](#)

Deutsche Presse-Agentur/Earthtimes – 29 November 2008

Yangon- A visiting European diplomat urged the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) to participate in the upcoming 2010 elections, political sources said Saturday. Attilio Massimo Iannucci, Asia-Pacific chief of Italy's foreign ministry, met Friday with senior NLD party members including veteran journalist Win Tin at the ambassador's residence in Yangon.

During the two-hour discussion, Iannucci urged the NLD to participate in 2010 election because there would be a chance to win again for them, Win Tin said.

"He said at present the military occupied 100 per cent of the government and after 2010, there would be only 25 per cent. It is much better than current situation," Win Tin told Deutsche Presse-Agentur dpa.

The Italian diplomat also said the international community could if NLD joins election.

"We told him that 25 percent would be just a word and in practice the military would be dominating. We said the constitution must be amended before the election," Win Tin said.

But he did not say whether the NLD would join election or not.

"There are two different approaches on the election within the NLD. Some want to participate and some do not," Win Tin said.

Myanmar's ruling junta is expected to field at least two pro-military parties to contest the 2010 elections, forming them out of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA).

The USDA was formed on September 15, 1993, as a popular support base for the military.

The association now claims to have 24 million members out of Myanmar's 56 million population, and has been cultivated to become the military's political arm for contesting elections.

"We will form two political parties for the 2010 elections," said a USDA member after attending their annual meeting in Naypyitaw, the military's new capital, on Friday.

The movement is an essential competent in the military's plans to introduce "democracy" to Myanmar.

Initial steps included drafting a new constitution having it approved by a national referendum in May.

Both processes were dubbed shams by many international observers because the charter-drafting process was controlled by the military, and the referendum supervised by the army resulted in an absurdly high approval rate exceeding 90 per cent.

The referendum drew intense criticism from Western democracies as it was pushed through in mid-May in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis that devastated the Irrawaddy delta region, leaving almost 140,000 people dead or missing.

The constitution has cemented the military's dominant role in future governments by guaranteeing it a high percentage of appointed senators who can block all controversial legislation.

Myanmar has been under military rule since 1962, when army strongman General Ne Win overthrew the country's first post-independence prime minister U Nu with a coup.

Although the military bowed to international pressure to hold an election in 1990, it refused to acknowledge the outcome.

The NLD, the party of Aung San Suu Kyi, won the 1990 polls by a landslide, but the military junta blocked it from taking office by claiming that a new constitution would be needed before civilian rule could work.

The junta took 18 years to come up with a new charter, and Suu Kyi - a Nobel peace laureate - has spent 13 of those years under house arrest.

[Myanmar fights AIDS with national awareness](#)

Xinhua - 1 December 2008

by Feng Yingqiu

YANGON, Dec. 1 () -- Myanmar official newspaper the New Light of Myanmar Monday called on the country's people to fight AIDS with national awareness, urging individuals and social organizations including community-based groups to work hard to enhance public awareness of AIDS.

The paper made the call in its editorial on the occasion of the falling of the World AIDS Day on Monday, which was designated by the United Nations.

The editorial stressed the paramount duty of all the national people to fight against the scourge of the disease in accord with the slogan of this year --"Stop AIDS, Keep the Promise, Scaling up prevention, treatment and care".

According to a latest report of the UNAIDS, the number of people infected with HIV in Myanmar dropped to 240,000 in 2007 from 300,000 in 2001.

The report attributed the fact to the fall in number of HIV-infected pregnant women.

The report revealed that there are 6 young women per 1,000 at the age between 15 and 24 infected with HIV, while it is for 7 young men per 1,000 at present in the country.

Official media reported earlier that the infection rate of HIV in Myanmar declined to 0.67 percent in 2007 from 0.94 percent in 2000.

The figures were based on the findings from a HIV/AIDS projection and impact analysis workshop organization by the Myanmar government and the World Health Organization in September last year.

In fight against major diseases, Myanmar has taken steps to control TB, malaria and HIV/AIDS as a national duty, realizing that these diseases can pose a great danger to the public health.

In its efforts to control AIDS, the Central Committee for Control and Elimination of AIDS was formed in 1989. A coordination body comprising the ministries, United Nations agencies and social organizations at home and abroad was also established.

As part of the project for control of AIDS and syphilis, efforts are being made for giving educative talks on AIDS, for 100-percent use of condoms in targeted groups in 170 townships in the country and for effective treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.

Work has also been underway for preventing spread of HIV among those who use drugs through injection and from mother to fetus at 37 hospitals and 106 townships, while preventing such spread through blood transfusion and introducing safe blood transfusion.

Besides, 13 strategies on preventive measures and rehabilitation are now being implemented under five-year national strategic plan (2006-2010) adopted collectively by the relevant ministries, local non-governmental organizations, UN agencies and community-based organizations,

In cooperation with foreign organizations in the fight, Myanmar is actively taking part in implementing the ASEAN HIV/AIDS Control Plan, the HIV Prevention Plan in Mekong Region countries, and regional and central level plans of UN agencies.

Moreover, Myanmar is also cooperating with neighboring countries to combat and control TB and HIV/AIDS under a special plan.

HIV/AIDS is among the three major communicable diseases of national concern designated by Myanmar. The other two diseases are tuberculosis and malaria.

[Generals plot victory in 2010 Burma election](#)

AFP/Bangkok Post - November 29, 2008

Rangoon - The head of the Burmese military junta has revealed plans for elections in 2010 under a controversial "road map" to democracy and says plans are well under way for a military victory, state media reported on Saturday.

Snr Gen Than Shwe's comments to a pro-junta group followed a number of heavy jail sentences handed down by the country's courts, including the lengthening of a prison term given to Burma's most famous comedian.

"The state's seven-step road map is, indeed, the only way to smooth (the) transition to democracy as well as (its) own transitional work programmes," Than Shwe was quoted as saying by the *New Light of Myanmar* newspaper.

"The government and the people have to materialize in harmony," he told the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a pro-military social organisation, the paper said.

Authorities say the group has 24.6 million members, about half of the country's 57 million population. Analysts have said the junta could turn the USDA into a political party ahead of the elections which are due in two years.

"Now, plans are well under way to see to the remaining steps including the 2010 transition work programme. So, it is fair to say that the future of the state structure is certain to materialize," Than Shwe said.

Than Shwe described a widely criticised national referendum held in May on a new constitution as a crucial step for the so-called road map.

The referendum was held a week after Cyclone Nargis hit, leaving 138,000 people dead or missing. Authorities said the poll, carried out without independent monitoring, was backed by 92.48 percent of voters.

The United States, European Union and United Nations have dismissed the lengthy "road map" in Burma as a sham due to the absence of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party.

"Despite various disturbances and pressure of those who do not want to realise the objective conditions of the nation, the goal of the state is drawing near," Than Shwe said.

Than Shwe's speech came in a month when more than 160 activists have been given long jail terms by the military regime, according to opposition sources, after protests led by the nation's revered Buddhist monks last year.

At least 31 people were killed in a brutal crackdown that followed the demonstrations, according to the United Nations.

The most famous Burmese comedian Zarganar was sentenced to 45 years in prison earlier this month, while sports writer Zaw Thet Htwe was handed a 15-year jail term.

Both were arrested in June after organising deliveries of aid to victims of Cyclone Nargis.

The NLD won a landslide victory in 1990 elections but the junta did not allow them to take office.

Burma has been ruled by the military since 1962.

[Journalists caught in crackdown by Myanmar junta](#)

Associated Press - 30 November 2008

YANGON, Myanmar — A court in military-controlled Myanmar has imprisoned two journalists for seven years each for undermining the country's ruling generals after being caught with a U.N. human rights report.

The court in a northeastern suburb of Yangon on Friday sentenced Thet Zin, editor of the local Myanmar-language journal Myanmar Nation, and Sein Win Maung, the paper's manager, after convicting them of undermining the government under the country's draconian Printing and Publishing Law.

The convictions were part of a renewed crackdown by the regime in the past month that has led to more than 100 people — including activists, writers, musicians and Buddhist monks — receiving jail sentences as long as 68 years. Many were transferred to prisons in remote regions.

The journalists' sentencing came the same day a court inside Yangon's Insein prison sentenced 13 members of the 88 Generation Students, a group at the forefront of a 1988 pro-democracy uprising, to six years for undermining stability, family members said.

The 13 activists were among 37 from the group handed long prison sentences for their roles in nonviolent protests, including pro-democracy demonstrations in September 2007 led by Buddhist monks that were violently suppressed.

Myanmar's military, which has held power since 1962, tolerates no dissent. It frequently arrests artists and entertainers regarded as opposing the regime.

The lengthy prison sentences have been condemned worldwide by Western governments and human rights organizations, who charge that the heavy-handed tactics makes a mockery of the ruling junta's professed plan to restore democracy through elections in 2010.

[Border Talks Between Burma and Bangladesh Resume](#)

Narinjara News - 11/29/2008

Commander-level border talks between Bangladesh and Burma resumed on Thursday after recent tensions over a maritime border dispute.

According to an official source, delegations from Bangladesh Rifles and Nasaka, Burma's border security force, attended a meeting that was held at Nasaka headquarters in Kyi Kan Byint in the western border town of Maungdaw.

Acting commander of BDR Battalion 8 from Cox's Bazar, Major Mohammad Sazzadul Kabir, and Operation Officer Major Mohammad Tanim Hossain, led the Bangladesh team while Nasaka Battalion Commander Major San Win Khin led the Burmese team at the meeting.

BDR sources said both sides agreed to maintain discipline and good relations in the border areas.

During the meeting, they discussed a variety of matters, including controlling criminal activities in the border areas, checking smuggling, the release of Bangladesh nationals detained in Burmese prisons, and stopping illegal entry into both countries.

The delegations from both countries also agreed to hold another such meeting after a few days.

Commander-level talks were stopped last month after a dispute over the maritime boundary between Bangladesh and Burma occurred.

[Chinese FM to visit Nepal, Myanmar](#)

Xinhua – 27 November 2008

BEIJING -- Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi will pay an official visit to Nepal and Myanmar from Dec. 2 to 5, at the invitation of his Nepalese counterpart Upendra Yadav and Myanmar Foreign Minister U Nyan Win.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said the purpose of the visit was to further consolidate good-neighborly cooperation with the two countries.

Responding to a question on Myanmar's domestic situation, Qin said China hoped to see all parties promoting domestic reconciliation through dialogue and gradually realizing stability, democracy and development.

He said the international community should play a constructive role in properly resolving Myanmar's issues while respecting its sovereignty.

"We will continue to support the mediation efforts of the UN secretary-general and his special envoy to Myanmar as well as the constructive role played by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)."

Qin said China would continue to play an active role with the international community to seek appropriate resolutions to this issues.

Yang is expecting to exchange views with his two counterparts on international and regional issues of common concern. He will also meet with leaders of Nepal and Myanmar during his visits.

[China, Myanmar pledge to promote bilateral relations](#)

Xinhua – 29 November 2008

BEIJING -- Senior military officials of China and Myanmar agreed on Saturday to strengthen the relations of the two countries and armed forces in an all-around way.

The two countries should enhance military and state-to-state exchanges to promote regional peace, stability and prosperity, said Chen Bingde, chief of the General Staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), while meeting his Myanmar's counterpart Shwe Mann.

Chen said the two sides have maintained cooperation in various fields, and witnessed smooth development in their military ties.

He hailed the firm support to each other in terms of national development and international affairs, especially those touching on the core interests of both nations.

As good neighbors since ancient times, China and Myanmar have helped each other to fight external aggression and to struggle for respective national independence and liberation in modern history, Chen said.

Shwe Mann, also member of the ruling Myanmar State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), agreed to strengthen bilateral ties in an all-around way.

He expressed appreciation for China's long-term support to Myanmar and reaffirmed Myanmar's adherence to the one-China policy.

[The unquenchable fire in Burmese hearts](#)

Christian Science Monitor - December 1, 2008

By Karen Zusman

I've seen tremendous courage in the face of a freedom-hating regime.

New York - Eleven hundred years and counting. That's the cumulative time in prison sentences given last month to a handful of people expressing political dissent in Burma(Myanmar).

The news gives me particular pain.

In August 2007, the Burmese regime eliminated fuel subsidies, causing the price to rise by 500 percent. Food costs spiked enormously overnight. A few weeks later, Buddhist monks took to the streets in nonviolent protest and many of them were shot or beaten by the junta. Understanding the significance of these events, I felt compelled to visit so I could bear witness.

What struck me as much as the horror of their stories was the fact that the Burmese people were willing to tell them. This was in stark contrast to my previous trip in 2004, when no one dared to speak about anything remotely political. Now, emboldened by the world's gaze, there was the hope that by sharing their stories they might keep that window of attention cracked open a little longer.

Much of what I learned, I heard from taxi drivers, flower vendors, waiters, students, housekeepers. Our conversations posed a difficult riddle: Each time I let anyone confide in me, I potentially endangered them. As one of the few white faces to arrive in Rangoon, just postprotests, there was strong reason to believe I was being watched.

Yet despite my caution, it seems I was sought out everywhere I went – people felt the need to express themselves at last. Behind closed doors with the shades pulled down and the music turned up, I sat with a group of students cross-legged on the floor. I pressed them before we began, "Are you sure you want to speak?"

Aung Soe (not his real name), a slender man in his mid-20s, jumped at the question. He shook his fist in the air.

"If we don't talk to you maybe we are cowards. I was downtown where the monks were shot just outside our Sule Pagoda. I was marching, too. In some ways it was the best day of my life. They can't take that away from me. From now on I speak the fire in my heart!"

By the time I returned home in November 2007, Burma had faded fast from the news.

Then, tragically, cyclone Nargis hit this past May and again the troubled nation held the world's attention. Yet despite repeat visits by UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambiri, negotiations with the junta's generals have been a dismal failure.

Today, the sentencing in Burma reads like ticker tape: 65 years, 45 years, 20 years, 2.5 years, 12 years, 14 years, extending its reach beyond the "Generation 88" student activists (leaders of the 1988 protests against the junta that resulted in thousands of deaths) to include comedians, poets, bloggers, even a rap star.

It is my belief that the Burmese with "fire" in their hearts will continue to speak out and plan further protests despite the terrible price it is exacting. Yet the success of their sacrifices seems tragically compromised as long as there are countries that support the junta's oppressive regime by selling it weapons. That's why these three actions must be taken:

- First, the US Senate must immediately confirm Michael Green to fill the newly created position of Special Envoy to Burma. Having a regional specialist installed in a dedicated post will bring focus to what has been a largely uncoordinated effort by advocacy, human rights, and UN groups.
- Second, the US delegation to the UN Security Council must pressure China, India, and Russia to uphold the arms embargo against Burma that is already observed by the European Union and the US.
- Third, we will all need to press President-elect Obama and his future administration to honor the platform that he ran on, which included strong support for human rights.

Just a month ago at the UN, 147 states voted to move forward on the creation of an Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Only the US and Zimbabwe voted against it. The US must not only reverse its vote but also work to ensure that the ATT includes language curbing arms sales to countries that commit egregious human rights violations against their own people. This would be a giant step forward in honoring Mr. Obama's commitment and would reassert America's role as a leader in the promotion of human rights.

By taking these steps, we could begin to usher in change for the people that, in the words of Mr. Green, "languish in the shadows as the rest of the world concentrates its energies elsewhere."

And we could satisfy the plea of my own Burmese friends, one of whom implored: "Please, Sister, do not let the world forget us." As Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's detained pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Laureate, once said: "Please use your freedom to promote ours."

- *Karen Zusman is a New York-based writer who travels to Burma as a student of Theravadan Buddhism.*

[Two-thirds of Myanmar HIV cases involve youths: UNICEF](#)

AFP – 1 December 2008

YANGON — Youths in Myanmar are particularly at risk from HIV, with almost two thirds of the near quarter million people living with the virus in that country aged under 24, the UN Children's Fund said Monday.

About 100,000 women are also living with HIV in Myanmar and many newborns are at risk of being infected, Ramesh Shrestha, the UNICEF representative in Myanmar, said in a statement for World AIDS Day.

"Young people have a higher propensity for risk-taking behaviour which exposes them to avoidable risks including exposure to HIV," Shrestha said.

"It is estimated that there are approximately 240,000 people living with HIV in Myanmar, of which almost two thirds are young people under 24 years of age," the statement said.

International humanitarian organization Medecins Sans Frontieres has said that about 76,000 of those living with HIV in Myanmar are in urgent need of antiretroviral treatment (ART).

A senior Myanmar health ministry official said more funding was needed to prevent HIV spreading inside the country.

"More funds are needed not only ART for AIDS patients but also for prevention projects," Kyaw Nyunt Sein told AFP.

About 11,000 AIDS patients around the country are getting ART from the government and international NGOs, he said.

Only 170 administrative regions out of 325 around the country can implement 100 percent condom promotion to prevent the HIV virus spreading because of funding shortages.

"We cannot give complete prevention. The disease mostly occurs through sexual contact, that's why we want to do 100 percent condom promotion for youths," he said.

Myanmar has been ruled by the military since 1962 and the impoverished nation's healthcare system is in poor condition.

[Thousands Die Needlessly Because Junta Spends Too Little on AIDS, Group Says](#)

New York Times - December 2, 2008

By [DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.](#)

Thousands of people in [Myanmar](#) are dying needlessly of [AIDS](#) each year because too little money is allocated to treating them, the international charity [Doctors Without Borders](#) said last week.

About 240,000 people in Myanmar are infected with the virus that causes AIDS, and about 76,000 are sick enough to need antiretroviral treatment, the group said. But only about 15,000 are getting it, and Doctors Without Borders is paying for 11,000.

The nongovernmental organization, which is allowed to work in only some parts of the country, is overwhelmed and is having to turn new patients away.

"It is unacceptable that a single N.G.O. is treating the vast majority of H.I.V. patients in a crisis of this magnitude," said Joe Belliveau, the charity's operations manager for Myanmar.

Many Burmese cannot afford the \$30 a month for the cheapest antiretroviral regimen from private doctors. Myanmar's government, run by a secretive military junta, has a long record of watching indifferently as its citizens die. In May, after a cyclone swept through the Irrawaddy Delta, leaving up to one million people homeless, it refused to let foreign aid workers in. Last year, it brutally put down antigovernment demonstrations by monks.

[According to Doctors Without Borders](#), the Myanmar government spends only 70 cents per citizen for health care each year. Money for AIDS drugs is available from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, but governments, not charities, must apply for it, and they must prove that the money will not be diverted to corrupt ends.

[An unnatural disaster in Burma](#)

Boston Globe | December 2, 2008

By Chris Beyrer and Frank Donaghue

IN THE FIELD of disaster relief studies it is a truism that the first responders, whether in an earthquake or a cyclone, are generally ordinary people in the affected area who have survived. They are the first to start digging out the rubble or tending the wounded. Civilian volunteers are the backbone of the later phases of emergency responses too - people who bring food and water, volunteer at shelters, give what they can. Only in a system as profoundly inhumane as Burma would such good Samaritans be punished for their compassion. But that is precisely what happened last week.

At least four civilian volunteers who tried to help the victims of Burma's ferocious Cyclone Nargis were sentenced to 15- to 59-year prison terms for their efforts. Among those jailed was the beloved comedian and satirist Zarganar, who was sentenced to 59 years in some of the world's most deadly prisons. Burmese journalists reporting on the cyclone were also sentenced.

These sentences have come among a wave of others, including decades-long sentences for monks who led last year's Saffron Revolution demonstrations; members of the National League for Democracy, the party that won Burma's last elections but was never allowed to govern; and the leaders of the 88 Generation, the students who supported Aung San Suu Kyi in her nonviolent struggle for social change.

Why imprison civilian volunteers in the midst of a humanitarian crisis? Before his arrest, Zarganar said, "I want to save my own people. But the government doesn't like our work. It is not interested in helping people. It just wants to tell the world and the rest of the country that everything is under control and that it has already saved its people."

Perhaps the clearest indication of the junta's priorities was its insistence on holding a national referendum on the new constitution in the still-devastated Delta region less than three weeks after the storm. The ruling generals placed survival of military rule over saving Burmese lives. This is tragically consistent with their past behavior: Burma has among the lowest levels of public funding in healthcare worldwide, less than \$1 per person in 2006, according to the World Health Organization. The people of Burma are impoverished, but the junta is rich and richly armed.

Despite these harsh realities and the extraordinary price Burmese citizens who oppose the generals must pay, many in the international community have called for expansion of aid to Burma. The International Crisis Group said last month, "Aid should rather be seen by international policymakers as valuable in its own right as well as a way of alleviating suffering, but also as a potential means of opening up a closed country, improving governance and empowering people to take control of their own lives." But with their show trials and these latest brutal prison terms, the generals have made it clear that improving governance and empowering the people of Burma is precisely what they are most unwilling to do.

Of course aid should be increased to the people of Burma, but not on the generals' terms, which include tight control on information, the denial of Burmese citizen participation in the response, and markedly limited access to the rest of the impoverished country not affected by the cyclone.

Those arguing that stepped-up international aid can deliver on political change have precious little evidence for this, especially since the political space has just abruptly narrowed. The incoming Obama administration may well increase assistance to Burma, but this should be coupled with more pressure on the junta and its allies, especially the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, China, and Russia, for political reform.

The longer-term development and well-being of the Burmese people is not simply dependent on levels of foreign aid, but on true political development and a return to democratic rule. There can be no "apolitical" humanitarian aid in places like Burma, however much we'd wish to see it. Just ask Zarganar.

Chris Beyrer is director of the Center for Public Health and Rights at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Frank Donoghue is CEO for Physicians for Human Rights. ■

[Gambira, Five Others Sent to Remote Prisons](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 1, 2008

By SAW YAN NAING

At least six political activists including the prominent Buddhist monk Ashin Gambira, one of the leaders in the September demonstrations last year, were sent to prisons in remote areas around Burma on Monday, said reliable sources in Rangoon.

Ashin Gambira, who received the longest prison term of 68 years, was transferred from Insein Prison to Hkamti Prison in Sagaing Division while his older brother, Aung Kyaw Kyaw, was sent from Insein Prison to Taunggyi Prison in Shan State in eastern Burma, according to a source who requested anonymity.

Also on Monday, Wanna Aung was sent to Pegu Prison in central Burma and Thiha Thet Zin was transferred to Myitkyina Prison in Kachin State in northern Burma, while Thein Zaw was moved to Kengtung Prison in Shan State, said the source. Another detainee, Htun Oo, was sent to Taungoo Prison in Pegu Division.

Sources also said that Tin Htoo Aung, a young ethnic activist, was transferred to Hkamti Prison in Sagaing Division on Saturday.

Also this weekend, about five members of the opposition party, the National League for Democracy, were sent to remote prisons, according to the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).

The five were arrested by Burmese authorities after they staged a protest in Rangoon calling for the release of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi during her birthday celebration.

An estimated 215 political detainees including Buddhist monks, NLD members, lawyers and journalists were given prison terms in November, and at least 136 have been transferred to remote prisons around Burma, according to the AAPP.

Bo Kyi, the joint-secretary of the AAPP, condemned the transfers "This is just another form of psychological torture by the regime. It will take a lot of time, money and effort for their families to visit and provide essential food and medicine."

There are an estimated 65 NLD members among the jailed dissidents, said the AAPP. The Burmese government has been condemned by the international community for its harsh judicial crackdown on Burmese pro-democracy activists.

However, the junta has ignored the calls and stuck to its so-called "seven-step road map" to democracy.

On Saturday, the junta leader, Snr-Gen Than Shwe, said at the 15th annual meeting of the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association that the seven-step roadmap is needed and is the only way to a smooth transition to democracy.

The Burmese military government says that it has implemented the first four steps of the roadmap and will hold a general election—step-five—sometime in 2010.

"Despite various disturbances and pressure of those who do not want to realize the objective conditions of the nation, the goal of the state is drawing near," he said.

[Indo-Burma border closed for Indian elections](#) Monday, 01 December 2008 19:35 by Salai Pi Pi

New Delhi – India's northeastern state of Mizoram, bordering Burma's Chin state, on Monday sealed-off the international boundary between the two countries in preparation for Tuesday's elections.

The deputy commissioner for Mizoram's Champhai district on Monday issued an order to close the 404 kilometer long Indo-Burma border for security purposes, PC Lal Duhthlanga, a sub-divisional police officer at the Champhai police station told Mizzima.

"We are going to have an election. For this purpose, all international and state boundaries will be closed," Duhthlanga said.

According to him, the border, closed at 5:00 a.m. Monday morning, will not reopen until 5:00 p.m. Tuesday.

On Tuesday, Mizoram state will elect 40 members to the Mizoram Legislative Assembly. Over 600,000, of an estimated population of over 900,000 in the state, are expected to cast votes, according to news reports.

Meanwhile, Duhthlanga said the state government has also deployed additional security, including Mizoram police and Assam Rifles, along the border, and particularly at trade point No. 2, which links

Zokhuathar village in Mizoram with Haimual village in Chin state – to try and prevent any crossing of traders and smugglers during election day.

"Assam Rifles and Mizoram police personnel are deployed along the border. One police post and Assam Rifles post are stationed on the main road [Indo – Burma border trade road (2)]," he added.

However, unlike with previous elections, when Burmese and other outsiders were forcibly evicted, arrested and deported from the state, so far the Mizoram government has not arrested any Burmese migrant workers because "there is no threat from foreigners to interfere in the polling," Duhthlanga said.

He commented that security in the state remains normal and that ballot boxes will be placed in all constituencies including areas known to be infested by Burmese rebels such as the Zomi Reunification Army (ZRA), Zomi Reunification Organization (ZRO) and Chin National Confederation (CNC).

"There is no movement or activity among armed groups such as the ZRA, ZRO and CNC this year," he added.

The closure of the border impacts border trade between India and Burma, which is one of the main lifelines for businesses in Mizoram, as most merchants and traders heavily rely on goods and commodities imported from Burma.

"The border seal includes trade activities. Except security personnel, no one can cross the border," a Champhai police officer told Mizzima by telephone.

However, unlike other times when the border has been closed due to conflicts or misunderstandings, the closure this time, say several Burmese traders in the state, will not have much impact on business.

"We don't think there will be a major impact on our business because the border seal will only be in place for two or three days," a Burmese trader from Aizawl, capital of Mizoram, told Mizzima.

In contrast, when the borders were closed for nearly two months earlier in June and July of this year, commodities in Mizoram, including in the capital, rose sharply, according to the local business community.

[NEWS ANALYSIS: Silencing Burma's Monks](#)

Irrawaddy - Monday, December 1, 2008

By MIN LWIN

The 68-year prison sentence handed down to Ashin Gambira for his role in last year's monk-led protests shows that Burma's brutal junta now exercises total control over the country's Sangha, or community of Buddhist monks, who many regarded as the last bastion of resistance against military rule.

Ashin Gambira, 29, was one of the organizers of the uprising, which captured international attention last September with dramatic images of thousands of peacefully marching monks confronting heavily armed soldiers. On November 18, he received an initial 12-year sentence, which was extended by another 56 years last week.

According to the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), 143 young monks were arrested and detained for their involvement in the demonstrations.

Fifty-six of these monks have already received lengthy prison sentences, while another 87 remain in detention awaiting a final judgment by courts that invariably do the regime's bidding.

Last year's massive show of defiance was sparked by the heavy-handed response of security forces to a march by monks in Pakokku Township on September 5. The monks, who were responding to a sudden increase in fuel prices that had a devastating effect on Burma's already struggling population, were tied to electrical poles and beaten in the streets.

The violence in Pakokku prompted Ashin Gambira and some other young monks to found the All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA) to demand an apology from the regime. They also called for a reduction in prices, the release of all political prisoners, and a dialogue between the military and the political opposition.

The protests that ensued, in Rangoon and other cities around the country, were the largest the country had seen in nearly two decades. As in 1988, when the military last faced a serious challenge to its stranglehold on power, the peaceful demonstrations ended in a bloodbath, with dozens dead and hundreds of monks and nuns rounded up in late-night raids. Many more went into hiding or exile to escape arbitrary arrest and torture.

Ashin Gambira managed to evade capture for two months, but the authorities finally caught up with him last November. Even then, he remained defiant, according to his lawyer, Aung Thein, who said that Ashin Gambira demanded that the court recognize the detained monks' right to remain in robes in accordance with Buddhist ecclesiastical law.

"We appealed to the court to respect Buddhist rules, which say that [government] authorities have no right to disrobe him or charge him with criminal offenses," said Aung Thein in an interview with *The Irrawaddy*.

Ashin Gambira argued that just as the army has laws relating to military personnel, the actions of monks should be judged according to Buddhist regulations. The judge rejected his argument.

Lawyers for the detained monks said that senior monks should be permitted to hear their cases, since there is no law in Burma that forbids the chanting of the *Metta Sutta*, the Buddha's teaching on loving-kindness.

Rather than recognizing the religious authority of the Sangha, the regime has continued to assert its control over the country's monks. The minister for religious affairs, Brig-Gen Thura Myint Aung, said that in a meeting held on November 22, 47 senior monks agreed that the ruling military council governed more than 500,000 monks in accordance with Buddhist regulations and state law.

Ashin Kumara, chairman of the state-controlled Sangha Maha Nayaka committee, reiterated the regime's position that monks are prohibited from participating in "secular affairs" or joining "illegal" organizations.

However, many senior monks insist that there is nothing wrong with monks taking action out of compassion for laypeople who are suffering as a result of misguided government policies.

"They called for a reduction of commodity prices, not to remove the government from power," said a senior monk from Rangoon Theravada Buddhist University in Mayangone Township.

"They demonstrated for the benefit of Buddhism," he added. "Buddhism can only flourish when the basic needs of the people are met."

"Our Lord Buddha instructed his fellow monks to wander and help in human affairs," said Paragu, a well-known writer and former monk, in an interview with *The Irrawaddy*. "Historically, the sons of Buddha had responsibility not just to uphold the Buddha's teachings, but also to work for the good of the laypeople."

[Laughter defying Burma's junta](#)

BBC: From Our Own Correspondent – 29 November 2008

Andrew Harding reflects on his friendship with Burmese comedian Zarganar who, despite repeated imprisonment, continues to make jokes about the country's military rule.

It has been an unusually busy few weeks in the Burmese gulag.

A sudden flurry of show-trials. A brisk and generous apportioning of life sentences.

And now the prison vans have begun scattering the guilty into the quietest corners of an isolated country.

The convicts' names are probably unfamiliar to you. The authorities would be happy to keep it that way.

Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, Nilar Thein, Zarganar, the list goes on.

Like their more famous colleague, Aung San Suu Kyi, these are Burma's bravest and brightest, devoured by their own government.

Over the past four years living Asia, I have been lucky enough to meet and befriend a handful of these criminals.

Mocking authority

I first ran into Zarganar in 2006.

I had come to Rangoon under cover and found a city full of whispers and fear.

Zarganar was the booming, smiling exception.

We arranged a discreet meeting at a diplomat's house. He shrugged off my concerns about his security.

"Of course you can film me," he said. "I'm not afraid."

Here was a man who had made his choice and was content to follow his own rules wherever they led him.

Zarganar is a big, bald man.

He trained as a dentist but soon discovered his true calling as a comedian, relentlessly mocking the absurdities of life under Burma's incompetent generals.

He quickly became the country's best-known, best-loved joker. And that role has already cost him.

He has been in and out of jail for years, his sketches censored, his performances banned.

Political crackdown

In September 2006, he sent his wife, son and daughter abroad for their own safety. They are now in America.

Zarganar and I stayed in touch by e-mail, and even through an online book club.

Whenever I managed to sneak into the country, we would meet up at a mutual friend's apartment to discuss politics and his other passion, the collected works of Benny Hill.

In September last year, Burma's monks took to the streets, spearheading a bold protest movement against the regime.

Zarganar - prominent in supporting the monks - was briefly arrested during the brutal crackdown that followed.

Then in May of this year, Cyclone Nargis tore through Burma, killing tens of thousands of people.

Again Zarganar was on the front lines raising donations and leading private relief missions to the flooded delta.

In Britain, he would probably have got an OBE for his efforts. In Burma, he got locked up again.

And this time, the generals, clearing the decks, decided to write their own punchline. Zarganar was sentenced - for public order offences - to 45 years in jail.

Family pride

His son, Myat Kaung, called me from New York last weekend just after the news came through. He is a chip off the old block.

Twenty-two years old. Working days as a messenger in Manhattan - spending his evenings composing hip-hop protest songs in Burmese.

Myat sounded impossibly calm on the phone. I could almost hear him smile.

"My dad's happy," he said. "He's always happy."

"He's doing what he wants to do. And I agree with him."

"I think he will spend a long time in jail. But I'm proud of him - all the time."

Like so many thousands of Burmese exiles, Myat is waiting for something to change back home.

"I'm glad my dad stayed there," he said. "You can't do anything from outside. You can only make change from inside."

Life imprisonment

I have tried very hard these past few years to understand the logic and the insecurities of Burma's generals. Their long-standing fears of internal disorder.

Their misguided economic policies. The political influence of neighbours like China and Singapore.

But how do you balance all that against the decision to lock up a man like Zarganar for the rest of his life?

What sort of rancid system, what sort of person, can persuade himself that is OK?

It is easy, of course, to be outraged. Anger is cheap.

Besides, I have left Asia now.

I have been blacklisted by the Burmese government and deported by its security services.

All this is, if you like, just a parting shot.

But right now, a friend of mine is sitting in solitary confinement in a tiny cell, with no windows, no natural light.

Zarganar's been suffering from high blood pressure, and stomach ulcers and a couple of days ago his son told me he had had another 14 years added to his sentence. That makes it 59 so far.

He is allowed occasional visits and he has managed, after a fashion, to send me brief messages.

I can picture him now, sitting on the floor and - as he has done in jail in the past - using a stick to write new jokes and songs in the dust.

His shoulders rock back, his bald head shakes gently, and his voice - that deep warm voice - a voice too honest for Burma's rulers - lets out a defiant chuckle.

From Our Own Correspondent was broadcast on Saturday, 29 November, 2008 at 1130 GMT on BBC Radio 4. Please check the [programme schedules](#) for World Service transmission times.