
Burma

Despite promises of political reform and national reconciliation, Burma's authoritarian military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), continues to operate a strict police state and drastically restricts basic rights and freedoms. It has suppressed the democratic movement represented by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, under detention since May 30, 2003, and has used internationally outlawed tactics in ongoing conflicts with ethnic minority groups.

Hundreds of thousands of people, most of them from ethnic minority groups, continue to live precariously as internally displaced people. More than two million have fled to neighboring countries, in particular Thailand, where they face difficult circumstances as asylum seekers or illegal immigrants. The removal of Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt in October 2004 has reinforced hard-line elements within the SPDC and resulted in increasing hostility directed at democracy movements, ethnic minority groups, and international agencies.

Lack of Progress on Democracy or Human Rights

The junta's pledges of democratic reform and respect for human rights continue to be empty rhetoric. The 2003 "road map" for a transition to democracy in Burma has made no progress. The National Convention to discuss and promulgate principles for a new constitution has continued to flounder. The convention met again from February to March 2005, but did not include representatives from the National League for Democracy (NLD) and several other ethnic nationality political parties which won seats in the 1990 elections. At this writing, delegates handpicked by the SPDC were due to resume their convention on December 5, 2005, in Nyaunghnapin camp in Hnawby township outside Rangoon.

The SPDC continues to ban virtually all opposition political activity and to persecute democracy and human rights activists. Almost all offices of pro-democracy and ethnic nationality political parties remain closed, except for the NLD headquarters in Rangoon which has been put under heavy surveillance. Freedom of expression, assembly, and association are still not respected.

Despite the release of 249 political prisoners in July 2005, the detention and arrest of people who express their political opinions continues, including five opposition Members of Parliament elected in the 1990 elections. More than 1,100 people are currently imprisoned for their political beliefs. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi continues to be held in virtually solitary confinement without access to newspapers, telephones, or any correspondence.

Three bombs detonated in central Rangoon on May 7, 2005. Official figures put the death toll at eleven, with 162 wounded. The junta used this incident to denounce and put pressure on the exiled All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) and other Thai-based anti-government groups, though no evidence was provided implicating these groups in the blasts.

Failed Reconciliation Efforts with and Continued Violence against Ethnic Groups

While seventeen ceasefire agreements have brought an end to the fighting in some areas of Burma, they have not resulted in political settlements or significant improvements in the daily lives of villagers. In 2005 there was an increase in government military presence in certain ceasefire areas, and the political concerns of ethnic communities appear to have been left unaddressed in the deliberations of the National Convention.

Some ethnic groups are now reconsidering ceasefire agreements, while some ceasefires have already broken down. The arrests of several Shan leaders, including the President of the Shan State Peace Council (SSPC) and the Chairman of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) in early 2005, led to the withdrawal of the Shan State National Army (SSNA) from its ceasefire agreement with the government. Peace talks between the government and the Karen National Union (KNU) also stalled in 2005 as Burmese forces continued to attack and destroy villages populated by Karen civilians or to uproot them from their homes to gain control over their land. Brutal and protracted fighting between the military government and various ethnic groups seeking autonomy and freedom has been consistent and ongoing.

The SPDC's campaigns of forcibly relocating minority ethnic groups has destroyed nearly three thousand villages, particularly in areas of active ethnic insurgency and areas targeted for infrastructure development. Forced relocation of entire villages continues.

The Burmese government has refused international access to areas of ongoing conflict, cutting off humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in violation of international humanitarian law. Hundreds of thousands of villagers have been forced to work as porters or laborers for little or no pay. Those who refuse to provide mandatory labor are often threatened with prosecution, or exhorted to pay a fee in lieu of their duties. Those who do not properly carry out their tasks are often shot or beaten to death. Anyone found to have made what the government deems "false complaints" to the International Labor Organization (ILO) can face prosecution. Government armed forces continue to engage in summary executions, torture, and the rape of women and girls. Children continue to be forcibly recruited by government armed forces.

Key International Actors

International efforts to assist the people of Burma have continued to meet serious obstacles and hostility from the SPDC.

The U.N. special envoy has not been allowed to visit Burma since March 2004, while the special rapporteur on human rights has not been able to visit the country since November 2003.

Amidst government-organized anti-ILO rallies, the ILO representative in Rangoon received death threats. In October 2005, the Burmese Labor Minister told the special adviser to the ILO's Director General that the government had decided to leave the ILO. The future of the ILO presence in Burma is now in doubt.

U.N. programs tasked to provide humanitarian assistance for the people of Burma continued to face challenges from bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, and extensive restrictions on both travel to project sites and the import of supplies and equipment. In 2005 the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria withdrew its U.S.\$98 million program on the ground that "its grants to the country cannot be managed in a way that ensures effective program implementation."

Efforts to place the situation in Burma on the agenda of the U.N. Security Council gained momentum in late 2005 with the publication of "Threat to the Peace: A Call for the U.N. Security Council to Act in Burma," which was jointly commissioned by former president of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel and South African Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu. It called for an urgent, new, and multilateral diplomatic initiative at the United Nations Security Council to bring about change in Burma.

The United States and European Union maintained sanctions on Burma. In July 2005 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), embarrassed by the junta in Rangoon and under pressure from the U.S. and E.U., successfully pressured the Burmese government to skip its turn as ASEAN's rotating chairman in 2006. ASEAN still faces difficulties in convincing the SPDC to fulfill promises made to other members on the commencement of genuine political reforms, national reconciliation, and the release of political prisoners including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. China, India, and Thailand continued to offer economic and political support to the SPDC. Within ASEAN, Thailand continues to be the SPDC's closest ally, undercutting other international efforts to pressure Burma to reform.

To improve relations with the SPDC, in 2005 the Thai government adopted an increasingly hard-line stance towards Burmese refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants. While continuing to put pressure on exiled pro-democracy activists and human rights advocates, the Thai government struck another major blow in March 2005 against Burmese opposition groups with a new policy requiring all Burmese refugees registered with U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to move to camps along the Burmese border, where they are cut off from the outside world. Thailand also continues to expel thousands of illegal immigrants to Burma every month. The Thai army has stated that Shan asylum seekers will not be allowed to cross the border.