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country summary

Burma

Burma's deplorable human rights record received widespread international attention in 2007 as anti-government protests in August and September were met with a brutal crackdown by security forces of the authoritarian military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Denial of basic freedoms in Burma continues, and restrictions on the internet, telecommunications, and freedom of expression and assembly sharply increased in 2007. Abuses against civilians in ethnic areas are widespread, involving forced labor, summary executions, sexual violence, and expropriation of land and property.

Violent Crackdown on Protests

Poor economic conditions sparked a series of demonstrations and arrests from February onward. Protests were directly related to declining living standards, limited access to health services and education, and poor electricity supplies. Despite booming revenues from natural gas exports, the government raised fuel prices sharply and without warning on August 15, which had an immediate and adverse effect on the civilian population.

Small-scale protest marches were conducted in Rangoon by members of the "88 Generation Students" and members and supporters of the National League for Democracy (NLD), calling for improved living standards and dialogue with the government on political reforms. Demonstrations were broken up by police and members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a pro-government "social welfare" organization with a nominal national membership of 23 million, and Swan Ar Shin, a civilian paramilitary group. Over 150 political dissidents were arrested and dozens went into hiding in August.

Demonstrations by Buddhist monks and civilians spread to other towns such as Mandalay, Sittwe, and Pakkoku in September. Following the beating of monks in

Pakkoku, public demonstrations increased. In late September marches by monks in Rangoon became larger, and political activists, artists, and other civilians gradually joined in the daily processions. On September 22 over 1,000 monks and supporters were permitted to march to the home of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

On September 26, demonstrations in Rangoon were violently dispersed by riot police, supported by regular army soldiers, who used teargas, rubber bullets, and automatic weapons against unarmed civilians. Following brutal nighttime raids on monasteries and homes, demonstrations continued the next day in Rangoon, Mandalay, Myitkina, Pegu, Sittwe, and Pakkoku, and were met with more violence by security forces. Small demonstrations continued for the next several days, as the police and army arrested and detained an estimated 3,000 monks in Rangoon. Reports from inside Burma suggested that an estimated 100 civilians were killed in the demonstrations in Rangoon; there were unverified reports of protester deaths in other locations throughout Burma. In its December report on the crackdown, Human Rights Watch was able to confirm 20 deaths, though the figure is likely higher. Official SPDC figures claim that 15 people were killed and over 3,000 arrested. The SPDC claims to have released over 2,000 detainees; there are fears several hundred remain incarcerated.

The SPDC made no concessions to international condemnation, staging mass rallies of the USDA and Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation throughout the country, condemning foreign interference in Burma, and blaming unrest on foreign media reports and exile radio broadcasts inciting protests.

Lack of Progress on Democracy

Burma's long-running National Convention concluded on September 3, after years of haphazard sessions since 1993. Participation by political parties, ethnic groups, and other non-military delegates was sharply circumscribed and alternative proposals routinely ignored. Criticism of the Convention was expressly forbidden by law. A list of "Detailed Basic Principles" has been finalized and this will form the basis of an eventual national constitution. Many of these provisions are designed to entrench military control over an envisaged civilian parliament, restrict citizens' freedoms and

rights, and provide the future president with sweeping emergency powers in the event of a threat against national sovereignty.

Human Rights Defenders

The SPDC continues to imprison an estimated 1,100 political prisoners including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose house arrest was extended in May for another year. In addition, political dissidents arrested in August and September, including Min Ko Naing and leaders of the “88 Generation Students” remain in detention at unknown locations.

Other attacks against human rights defenders included the beating in April of two members of the Human Rights Defenders and Promoters group by USDA forces, north of Rangoon. Authorities detained Phyu Phyu Tin, a leading HIV/AIDS educator, between May 21 and July 2, for protesting against the lack of access to antiretroviral drugs in government hospitals.

The SPDC appointed the deputy labor minister, Maj. Gen. Aung Kyi, as official liaison to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The two sides have already conducted preliminary meetings on establishing regular dialogue.

Continued Violence against Ethnic Groups

In ethnic areas of the borderlands human rights violations are widespread, involving forced labor, summary executions, sexual violence against women and girls, land confiscations, and the use of landmines to disrupt civilian food production. The ongoing military offensive in northern Karen state has displaced an estimated 40,000 civilians since early 2006, with an estimated 150 civilians killed by Burmese army attacks and landmines. Forty-three new Burmese army bases have been built in the area, using convict and forced civilian labor; local civilians were also forced to supply construction materials. An estimated 500 convict porters were killed as a result of Burmese army abuses, including through the practice of “atrocious demining”—forcing civilians to act in effect as human minesweepers. The use of landmines by the Burmese army and non-state armed groups is widespread.

Abuses by Burmese military units are commonplace against civilians also in Karenni, Chin, and Shan states. The army continues to use sexual violence with impunity in ethnic areas. For example, in February four teenage girls were raped by four Burmese army officers in Putao, Kachin state.

Since January 2006 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has not been permitted to conduct prison visits. During 2007 they gradually closed several field offices in the countryside due to restrictions on their activities. In a rare public statement issued in June, the ICRC voiced concerns that “repeated abuses committed against men, women and children living along the Thai-Myanmar [Burma] border violate many provisions of international humanitarian law.”

Child Soldiers

Recruitment of children into the government armed forces continues as a result of high desertion rates and chronic understaffing. Recruiters and civilian brokers used coercion, threats, and physical force to recruit children as young as 10. Former soldiers indicated that in many training camps children constituted 30 percent or more of new recruits.

Several non-state armed groups also continue to recruit children as soldiers, although in numbers far lower than the Burmese army.

Humanitarian Concerns, Internal Displacement, and Refugees

Burma’s humanitarian crisis worsened in 2007 as government restrictions on United Nations and international development agencies’ activities continued, including close monitoring and restrictions of movement. A United Nations Development Programme household living conditions survey issued in June showed that one-third of civilians in Burma live below the poverty line.

Despite official figures released by the SPDC and UNAIDS that argued that the country’s HIV/AIDS epidemic had decreased, there are concerns that the extent of the crisis might be underestimated because of limitations on travel and access to healthcare facilities by foreign nongovernmental organizations. The “Three Diseases

Fund” began operations in 2007 with two rounds of grant disbursements to address the epidemics of HIV, malaria, and tuberculosis in Burma. A major report on health and human rights released by US research institutes in June argued that epidemics of malaria, tuberculosis, HIV, and other diseases, many of them developing drug resistant strains, in Burma’s border areas were exacerbated by government healthcare expenditures that are a fraction of state military expenditure.

There was little change in the plight of the estimated half a million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in eastern Burma during 2007. Estimating the number of displaced people in other areas, including urban displacement, is difficult. International humanitarian organizations are denied access by the SPDC to IDP settlements in Shan and Karen states beside the border with Thailand.

Thousands of civilians fleeing fighting in Karen state are prevented from moving to camps in Thailand by the Thai authorities. Refugees from Shan state are routinely denied sanctuary in Thailand, and there were incidents of refugees being forced back to Burma in 2007. An estimated 2,500 Rohingya Muslims from western Burma and Bangladesh arrived in southern Thailand from November 2006 to May 2007 and were arrested by Thai security forces. In several incidents, Rohingya men were subject to refoulement to Burma by Thai authorities.

Some 150,000 refugees remain in 14 refugee camps along the border with Thailand. Since 2004 an estimated 40,000 refugees have been resettled to third countries such as the United States, Canada, Norway, Australia, and Sweden. Thai authorities have all but stopped their Provincial Admissions Board mechanism for ascertaining asylum seeker claims, and regularly threaten to send back unregistered camp residents to IDP settlements inside Burma.

Restrictions on migrant workers from Burma in Thailand increased, with a curfew invoked in several provinces on migrant workers and a ban on their use of mobile phones and motorbikes. Burmese migrant workers and refugees continue to be subject to harassment, arbitrary arrest, and abuses in detention in India, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Key International Actors

Responding to the August-September events, the UN secretary-general's special envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, visited Burma twice, meeting with the senior SPDC leadership and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. He reported back to the Security Council on October 5 that there were "continuing and disturbing reports of abuses being committed by security and non-uniformed elements." Despite international calls for Gambari to have access to detainees, this was not permitted by the SPDC, who tightly controlled his schedule during the visits.

A special session of the UN Human Rights Council was convened on October 2, issuing a statement that "strongly deplores the continued violent repression of peaceful demonstrations in Myanmar, including through beatings, killings, arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances." After four years of being denied access by the SPDC, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, was permitted to visit and went in November.

International condemnation of the violent September crackdown included foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) issuing a statement expressing their "revulsion" at the use of force. The United States imposed targeted financial sanctions on the 14 top leaders of the SPDC. The EU reinforced their Common Position on sanctions to Burma, and Japan suspended some aid projects. The reaction from China, India, and Russia was muted, as officials called on the SPDC and demonstrators to exercise restraint, but refused to issue strong statements denouncing the use of violence by the SPDC.

Throughout 2007 ASEAN increased its criticism of the SPDC, expressing exasperation over the slow pace of reform and unwillingness to consult with regional partners, although it permitted Burma to sign the ASEAN Charter in November.

The EU continued to invite Burmese officials to multilateral meetings such as the Asia-Europe Meeting in May, despite EU Common Position provisions banning attendance without progress on human rights.

China, India, Russia, and Ukraine continued to sell large numbers of weapons to the SPDC, and in May Russia announced the sale of a nuclear test reactor to Burma.

Foreign investment in Burma's natural energy sector increased, with natural gas exploration contracts signed with companies from China, India, South Korea, Thailand, and Malaysia. Natural gas sales from the Yetagun and Yadana fields accrued an estimated US\$2.16 billion to the SPDC in 2007.

In February the International Labour Organization (ILO) reached an agreement with the SPDC on a mechanism for reporting cases of forced labor for a year from March 2007. The ILO stated in July that despite the mechanism there was still widespread use of forced labor in Burma.

UN Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict Radhika Coomaraswamy, visited Burma in June and secured agreement from the SPDC to set up a mechanism on reporting the use of child soldiers.