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Oct 2007/2

A Fortnightly Bulletin of Current NTS Issues Confronting Asia

# The Saffron Revolution and Human Security

# Human Security Threatened

18 September 2007 marked the day that Buddhist monks in Burma took to the streets to protest the government's removal of fuel subsidies, a move which had a devastating ripple effect over the economy and social activity of people throughout Burma. This edition takes a look at the state of human security in Burma – including events since rising fuel prices as well as other human insecurity incidents that have been somewhat forgotten in recent years.

### Threats to Economic and Food Security

The lack of economic security due to dramatic rises in fuel prices was a driving force of the Sept 2007 protests. The removal of fuel-price subsidies by Burma's military government in August 2007 resulted in a 500% spike in rationed fuel prices. This move is said to be part of the government's emerging economic and financial reform program, notably coinciding with a high-

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# 7 Spheres of Human Security \*

- Economic security requires an assured basic income for individuals, usually from productive and remunerative work or, as a last resort, from a publicly financed safety net. Unemployment problems constitute important factor underlying political tensions and ethnic violence.
- **Food security** requires that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to basic food.
- **Health security** aims to guarantee a minimum protection from diseases and unhealthy lifestyles.
- Environmental security —aims to protect people from the short- and long-term ravages of nature, man-made threats in nature, and deterioration of the natural environment.
- Personal security —aims to protect people from physical violence, whether from the state or external states, from violent individuals and sub-state actors, from domestic abuse, or from predatory adults...
- Community security —aims to protect people from the loss of traditional relationships and values and from sectarian and ethnic violence. Traditional communities, particularly minority ethnic groups are often threatened.
- Political security —concerned with whether people live in a society that honors their basic human rights. Human rights violations are most frequent during periods of political unrest. Along with repressing individuals and groups, governments may try to exercise control over ideas and information.

<sup>\*</sup> from the UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report



level mission to the country of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank officials, who have long pressed the junta to reduce or abolish a range of price subsidies.

Unfortunately, this has only served to feed into further economic insecurity for the people of Burma. Prices for compressed natural gas, which the government had in recent years promoted for use in commercial vehicles, have increased fivefold, while the price of basic commodities has skyrocketed in line with higher transportation costs. Bus fares and taxi charges doubled almost immediately in urban centres such as Yangon, Mandalay and Moulmein, resulting in drastically reduced passenger loads.

According to a report by the Asia Times, a Yangon-based financial analyst noted that the increase in bus fares will disproportionately affect the urban poor. It is estimated that manual workers and day-laborers in the country's main cities, who earn less than 2,000 kyat (US\$2 at the unofficial exchange rate, which is much closer to the real world than the official rate) a day, will, because of higher prices, have to pay more than half their wage in travel costs. In certain instances, it may even be as much as three-quarters of their daily income.

Such inflation has without a doubt affected the price of food. In Yangon, food prices have already risen steeply. According to aid workers monitoring local market prices in the city, within

# Selected Wages and Prices (averages) in Burma\*

Daily wage (unskilled labour) Daily wage (skilled labour) Daily income (taxi driver)	K 700- 1000 K 1500 – 2000 K 3000- 5000	Rice (~ 2kg)	K 700- 790 (Aug 2007)
,		Palm oil (~ 1.65 kg)	K 2070-2450
Monthly wage (clerical)  Monthly wage (junior exec.)  Monthly wage (mid-level)	K 20,000 – 30,000 K 30,000- 40,000 K 50,000- 70,000	Poultry (~ 1.65kg)	K 3350 (March 2007)
Monthly wage (senior level)	K 80,000- 150,000	Prawns (~ 1.65kg)	K 3600
Taxi fare	K 1500 – 3000 (early Sept 2007)	Freshwater fish (~ 1.65kg)	K 2000 – 3000 (March 2007)
Bus fare	K 50 – 250 (early Sept 2007)	Egg (10)	K 750 (March 2007)
Gasoline (gallon)	K 2500 (since mid-Aug 2007)	Sugar (~1.65kg)	K 1380 (March 2007)
Diesel (gallon)	K 3000	Simple Meal	K 400 – 500 (June 2007)
	(since mid-Aug 2007)	Briyani	K 1000 (June 2007)
Antibiotics (Amoxycillin, India; 10)	K 300 (26 Sept 2007)	Fried rice	K 800- 1000 (June 2007)
Paracetamol (local; 100)	K 850 (26 Sept 2007)	Tea	K 300 (Aug 2007)
Cold Medicine (Indonesia; 4 tablets)	K200 (26 Sept 2007)	Land line set-up fee	K 1 million (April 2007)
Iron supplement (Thailand; 60)	K3600 (26 Sept 2007)	Mobile phone license fee	K 1.5 million (April 2007)

Source: Myanmar Govt, private media and personal communications. Published in New Light of Myanmar, 15 October 2007

<sup>\*</sup> Since 2001, the official exchange rate has varied between 5.75 and 6.70 kyats per US dollar. However, the street rate (unofficial or black market rate), which more accurately takes into account the standing of the national economy, has varied from 800 kyats to 1335 kyats per USD dollar.

a week in mid August, the price of rice rose by nearly 10%, edible oils by 20%, meat by about 15% and garlic and eggs by 50%. Moreover, the price of a standard plate of Burmese noodles had nearly tripled. Such price rises are thus crippling for most residents. According to a Burmese economist, people "could hardly afford food before. Now their weekly budget for essential foodstuffs is going to buy even less - their purchasing power has been reduced by more than 25% virtually overnight."

These effects have even hit the junta's key political support groups, in particular the civil service, which could potentially trigger a backlash. In the report by the Asia Times, an elderly retired office worker complained that her pension now barely covers the taxi fare she pays to retrieve it from government offices. Inflationary pressures will also inevitably lead to demands for salary and wage increases among private-sector government and workers. However, economic analysts note that it is highly unlikely that the government will at, any time soon, increase wages, having shouldered a major wage increase for government employees in 2006.

The private sector, already suffering from slack domestic demand, will also likely find it hard to meet employees' demands to increase wages. Some private businesses have already closed down, at least temporarily. Two of Yangon's biggest hotels, Kandawgyi Hotel and Hotel Nikko, have closed their doors due to drastic downturn in the tourism industry. Teashop owners have also noted a reduced number of customers and day workers are relying on rice handouts from their employers. The economic downturn has even hit prostitutes, who now walk the streets in daylight – unembarrassed – as they search for means to survive.

The more pressing question, rather, is whether the already impoverished population can absorb the sudden economic shock. Several news reports have noted that United Nations' surveys for Myanmar reveal a trend toward increasing poverty and a growing income gap between rich and poor. It is estimated that more than 90% of the population in Burma live on less than one US

dollar a day, thereby making Burma one of the 20 poorest countries in the world. Food security has thus become a significant issue in many parts of the country, especially in the remote and border areas

According to the UN's World Food Program (WFP), about 5 million people in Burma are chronically short of food. According to WFP's regional director for Asia, Tony Banbury, more than a third of Burma's children suffer from malnutrition, and about 100,000 of them die each year. This is ironic given the fact that Burma is a food surplus country.

Food insecurity has been a result of the junta's existing restrictive policies, in which some farmers are forced to sell the government their crops at below-market prices, which therefore discourages production. The WFP has tried to do its part by seeking to provide supplies to 500,000 of them each month but, in light of the recent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, the agency is now only reaching about 200,000 of them.

Banbury also noted that while countries worldwide have been quick to endorse sanctions to push the military regime, the same level of effort has not been done in terms of providing humanitarian aid to the innocent masses who are suffering. To meet its three-year goal of providing aid to 1.6 million people a month by 2009, the WFP says it needs US\$51.1 million but currently lacks about 70% of the funding needed.

This has also had repercussions on the monks in Burma who depend much on alms giving from the people. With fewer donations given in light of the fuel prices, the monks are losing a significant portion of their average allowance.

# Threats to Personal, Political and Health Security

In September 2007, the monks began their mass peaceful protest of walking through the streets of Burma. With their respected position in society, the monks' perseverance earned them more support and rallied more civilian demonstrators as they called for a reduction in commodity





prices, the release of political prisoners and national reconciliation. Demonstrations on this

scale have not been seen since the nationwide protests in 1988, which were violently suppressed

Recent Events in Burmese Political History			
1982	Law designating people of non-indigenous background as "associate citizens" in effect bar		
	such people from public office.		
1987	Currency devaluation wipes out many people's savings and triggers anti-government riots.		
1988	Thousands of people are killed in anti-government riots. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) is formed.		
1989	SLORC declares martial law, arrests thousands of people, including advocates of democracy and human rights, renames Burma Myanmar, with the capital, Rangoon, becoming Yangon. NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, is put under house arrest.		
1990	Opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) wins landslide victory in general election, but the result is ignored by the military.		
1991	Aung San Suu Kyi awarded Nobel Peace Prize for her commitment to peaceful change.		
1992	Than Shwe replaces Saw Maung as SLORC chairman, prime minister and defence minister. Several political prisoners freed in bid to improve Burma's international image.		
1995	Aung San Suu Kyi is released from house arrest after six years.		
1996	Aung San Suu Kyi attends first NLD congress since her release; SLORC arrests more than 200 delegates on their way to party congress.		
1997	Burma admitted to Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN); SLORC renamed State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).		
2007 May	Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest extended for another year.		
2007 June	In a rare departure from its normally neutral stance, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) accuses the government of abusing the Burmese people's rights.		
2007 Aug	Wave of public dissent sparked by fuel price hikes. Dozens of activists are arrested.		
2007 Sept	Military government declares 14 years of constitutional talks complete and closes the National Convention.  Buddhist monks hold a series of anti-government protests. Aung San Suu Kyi is allowed to leave her house to greet monks demonstrating in Rangoon. It is her first public appearance since 2003.  Authorities begin to crack down on protests, but demonstrations continue.  UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari meets opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.		
2007 Oct	Normality returns to Rangoon amid heavy military presence. Monks are absent, after thousands are reportedly rounded up.		
	After some delay, UN Security Council deplores military crackdown on peaceful protestors		
Source: Timeline	e- Burma, BBC News, 12 October 2007		

by the authorities and had resulted in approximately 3,000 peaceful demonstrators' deaths.

Even so, the government has taken steps to quell the protests, such as shutting down the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, minutes before hundreds of monks arrived in a bid to commence a religious boycott of accepting alms from anyone with government connections. However, withouth entering the Shewdagon Pagoda, Burma's holiest shrine, monks were unable to hold the formal ceremony to impose the religious boycott.

This then culminated with the violent crackdown on protesters, which shocked the world. Burmese military and security forces fired at protesters, many of whom were monks, and arrested thousands of protesters. About 4000 monks were rounded in a week, disrobed and shackled and held at a disused race course and technical college. Public internet access was highly restricted and a 60-day 9pm-5am curfew was imposed along with public warnings of legal action against protesters. Government officials said that 10 people were killed but dissident groups, analysts and foreign diplomats suggested that the toll is much higher; as high as 200 people killed and 6000 people detained.

There has also been an increased intensity of house raids of people suspected of being involved in the protests. According to the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), Mr Win Shwe, member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) died as a result of torture during interrogation. He, along with five colleagues were arrested on 26 September, the first day of the crackdown. The AAPP also noted that Win Shwe's body was not sent to his family; instead interrogators indicated that they had cremated it.

According to BBC's Southeast Asia correspondent, Jonathan Head, the Burmese junta operates a network of about 80 prisons and interrogation centres and some 60 labour camps. Their conditions are known to be atrocious, with torture routinely used on the prisoners. This has been exacerbated by the lack of food and medical

needs. In Amnesty International's 2007 report, Burmese authorities had imposed new restrictions on the quantity of food that prisoners were able to receive from relatives, and reduced the budget for food granted to prison authorities. Medical shortages in prisons were noted in the report.

Foreigners have also been caught in the line of fire, in particular, journalists. At least four journalists have been arrested and about 10 others injured or harassed. Among the arrested was Min Zaw, a Burmese reporter for the Japanese newspaper The Tokyo Shim bun, who was taken from his home by plain-clothes security personnel and has not been seen since. The arrests came a week after Japanese video reporter, Kenji Nagai, was killed in Rangoon at close range by military forces during the crackdown.

The lack of personal and political security is also reflected by the junta's efforts in impeding international monitoring and assistance to improving the human security of the people of Burma. After nearly two decades of presence in Burma, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has decided to shut down its operation due to the lack of cooperation. Pierre Krahenbuhl, director of operations, in Geneva, said the ICRC's humanitarian work in Myanmar (Burma) has "now reached near- paralysis. He further pointed out that ICRC staff were still unable to resume visits to detainees anywhere in the country or to conduct independent field operations in sensitive border areas. Despite sustained ICRC effort to overcome differences that have surfaced over many months, the Burmese authorities continued to restrict the organization's work programs, which jeopardizes its ability to fulfil its humanitarian roles.

The ICRC therefore decided to close two of its offices, one in Mawlamyine (Mon State) and the other in Kyaing Tong (East Shan State). It is carefully considering whether to keep open its remaining field offices. Krahenbuhl added that living and security conditions for civilians in sensitive border areas remain a real concern for the ICRC. Moreover, there are strong indications of a deterioration in conditions of detention and treatment at several places of detention.





Since 2005, the ICRC has regularly raised issues of urgent humanitarian concern with the Government of Myanmar both orally and in writing, insisting both on measures to improve the situation and on being able to effectively and freely carry out its activities. However, with no tangible response from the authorities and with the restrictions that have been imposed on the ICRC, the organization's core humanitarian activities are now at stake.

The ICRC deplores the failure of its efforts to rekindle a meaningful humanitarian dialogue with the Ministry of Home Affairs. The ICRC remains open to high-level discussions with the Myanmar authorities to break the persisting deadlock and stands ready to act immediately to address the most pressing humanitarian issues provided that it may operate independently and with regular and direct access to persons in need.

The ICRC opened an office in Yangon and started a limb-fitting and rehabilitation project in 1986. Since 1999 it has carried out assistance and protection work in places of detention and sensitive border areas. Over the past year, the ICRC has reduced the number of its expatriate staff from 56 to 16 because of the restrictions imposed by the government.

Furthermore, the increased controls restrictions in the wake of the protests only serve to further decline the pitiful state of health security in Burma. According to a report by the Boston Globe, the World Health Organization ranked Myanmar's overall health care system as the world's second worst in the year 2000 - just above war-ravaged Sierra Leone. Highlighting statistics from the United Nations' Children's Fund (UNICEF), one in three children in Burma is malnourished; and about 105 per 1,000 children die before age 5 in Myanmar, compared with 19 per 1,000 in nearby Vietnam and 7 per 1,000 in the US. Poor maternal healthcare is also apparent given that at least 360 of every 100,000 women die in childbirth, compared with 130 in Vietnam and 17 in the US.

Stephen Atwood, UNICEF's regional adviser for health and nutrition in East Asia and the Pacific, noted however that the military government does a fair job of conducting childhood immunization campaigns and routine vaccinations, but adds it's impossible to assess the health situation in many ethnic areas that are off-limits to foreigners. However, according to the findings from a 2007 report by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley and Johns Hopkins University, such government efforts are hardly enough as most of Burma's health care is funded by international sources. Moreover, the report notes that the government spends only about 3 percent on health annually, as compared to 40 percent on the military.

# Community Security remains threatened

While the crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Burma has grabbed the world's attention, the junta continues to wage its war against the country's ethnic minority groups. A new report by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), has documented the eradication of 167 Burmese villages and the forced internal displacement of around 76,000 people from January to September 2007 alone. In total, it is estimated that around half a million people are currently displaced. The report, entitled Internal Displacement in Eastern Burma - 2007 Survey Internal Displacement in Eastern Burma - 2007 Survey is based on research conducted in 38 districts of Burma, and can document the fact that the country's military dictatorship, under the title State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), is carrying out systematic human rights violations through targeted attacks on the civilian population.

Further statistics have also been documented in Amnesty International's 2007 Report on Burma, which has focused on the persecution of the Karen minority. The report noted that military operations against the Karen National Union (KNU) in eastern Kayin (Karen) State and neighbouring districts have increased. More than 16,000 were displaced by the conflict. Villagers reported widespread and systematic commission of acts constituting violations of international humanitarian and human rights law on a scale that amounts to crimes against humanity.

Destruction of houses and crops, enforced

disappearances, forced labour, torture and extrajudicial killings of Karen civilians have also increased. Many villagers faced food shortages after the authorities banned them from leaving their village to farm or buy food. The use of land mines by both the armed wing of the Karen National Union and the Junta is also on the rise. Other violations included acts of collective punishment, such as prolonged closures and other movement restrictions, the burning of whole villages and the reported killing in February 2007 in northern Kayin state of a village headman and other civilians. In other areas skirmishes took place between the Shan State Army-South and the army, with the loss of civilian life.

According to researchers from the Washington-based American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), satellite pictures have even revealed the extent of the Junta's destruction of ethnic minority Karen villages. The pictures show ethnic minority Karen villages in Burma burnt to the ground. Patches of scorched earth corresponding to settlements – of about 31 "attack sites" – reportedly destroyed are visible in the high-definition photographs taken by satellites zooming in on Burma and analysed by AAAS researchers.

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# What is the International Community doing about it?

#### **ASEAN**

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) had in the past appeared reluctant to condemn a fellow member but member-states appear increasingly uneasy. During a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in New York, they urged the Burmese authorities to halt violence against the demonstrators.

ASEAN has of late been criticized for not suspending Burma's membership the organization. To ASEAN, suspension would do little in facilitating talks amongst the affected parties in Burma. According to Singapore's Education, Tharman Minister for Shanmugaratnam, "We have to bear in mind that Myanmar is a buffer state between China and India, so if Myanmar dissolves into civil war, both of Myanmar's neighbours will be dragged in. It is therefore in everyone's interest that Myanmar remains a part of ASEAN and it would be counter-productive to push Myanmar towards further isolation."

Singapore Foreign Minister, George Yeo, added that as a regional family, ASEAN had the "moral authority" to get all political parties in Burma to engage in a genuine dialogue. Mr Yeo also noted that this "moral authority" is likely to be asserted during the ASEAN Summit in November, which will also involve China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand. ASEAN has also pledged its full support for the UN's efforts in negotiating with the Burmese junta.

#### China

China has a close trading and diplomatic relationship with Burma and is likely to be the country with the strongest potential to influence events in Burma. It has blocked UN sanctions against Burma but recently called for "restraint" by "all" parties. Rather than impose sanctions, China noted that the international community should provide constructive assistance to Burma. Moreover, China believed that the issue would





only be effectively resolved by the Burmese people and government with their own efforts through dialogue and consultations.

Burma's oil and gas reserves are important for a rapidly developing and energy-hungry China but, as a regional power, Beijing also has an interest in ensuring that events in Burma do not lead to regional instability.

# European Union (EU)

While the EU is conscious of its lack of leverage over Burma, it is urging India, China and ASEAN to take a tougher line. Some sanctions are already in place. In 1996, the EU banned arms sales and expelled military attaches, and it froze the assets of individuals within the junta. It withdrew preferential trade status from Burma and subsequently cut off all non-humanitarian aid to the country. European Parliamentary deputies have called on the EU to work with the US and ASEAN to prepare measures against the Burmese government, including targeted sanctions.

EU as a whole has relatively few economic interests in Burma but France remains a major investor, with a joint gas project between the US firm Chevron and French Total.

#### India

India has close economic and diplomatic ties with Burma. It has expressed concern over the current crisis but generally maintains a careful silence over the situation, describing it as an internal affair of Burma. India's former Defence Minister George Fernandez has described India's current position as "disgusting". As the world's most populous democracy, India is under pressure from the West and from activists at home to take a stronger stand in support of democratic forces in Burma.

India is concerned above all with protecting its oil interests in Burma, signing a new deep-water exploration deal in the same week that protests got under way. According to Namrata Goswami, associate fellow at India's Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, India's Burma policy hinges on 'constructive engagement' in order to

procure natural gas, obtain security co-operation to control insurgency in the North-East, and build roads connecting the North-East with Southeast Asia through Myanmar for bolstering economic linkages.

She also noted that if Myanmar were to become a failed state, India stands in direct danger non-traditional security issues, in particular, cross border flows of violence, drugs and disease.

#### Russia

While Russia is much less important than China as an ally and trading partner to Burma, Moscow has stood beside Beijing in opposing any attempts to bring foreign pressure to bear on the Burmese government. In early 2007, Burma and Russia signed a deal that could lead to the construction of a Russian nuclear research reactor in Burma. In 2006, Moscow offered fighter jets and air defence systems to Rangoon in exchange for access to Burmese oil. Russian commentators have suggested that a change of government in Rangoon would bring in an administration more susceptible to Western influence than the incumbents.

# **United Kingdom**

The UK's status as the former colonial power does not give it any particular influence as economic links have declined and London - in common with other Western governments - has been vocal in its condemnation of the military government. The UK has also strengthened its support for the poorest people of Burma by increasing its aid from £9 million in 2007 to £18 million by 2010. This was announced by Douglas Alexander, UK's Secretary of State for International Development, during a debate in the House of Commons in late October 2007.

The UK once had major interests in petroleum in Burma but no longer has any large-scale investment in the country. British companies continue to do business in Burma, with hardwoods being an important import. Campaigners have complained that UK government policy on trade with Burma is vague and not enforced.

### **United States**

Washington has called for political change in Burma and expressed support for the recent protests. In 1997 the US banned new investment in Burma, and in 2003 it banned most Burmese imports and dollar transactions. It has announced it will impose further sanctions against 14 senior officials in Burma's government, including the country's acting prime minister and defence minister. US ambassador to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad had warned Burma's generals it was time to prepare for a transition government, while conceding that the military would have "its role to play in the transition and post-transition."

But in common with the other Western countries, the US realises its influence is weak when compared to that of China, India and ASEAN. As a result of sanctions few economic interests remain, a major exception being the US share in the Chevron-Total gas project

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