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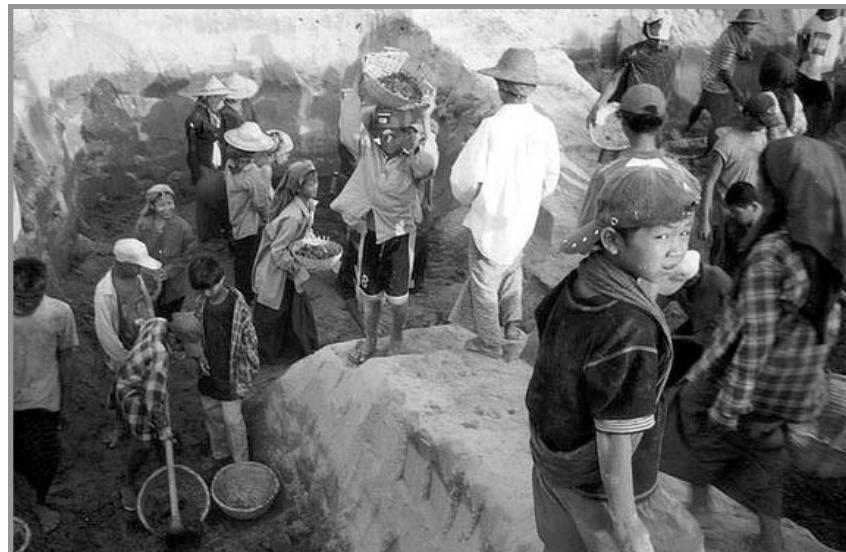
Burma: terror rules

The generals of the military dictatorship that is crushing Burma have a simple objective: to stay in power and enrich themselves by any means. They have transformed Burma, which was once a prosperous nation, into a developing country. The civil population is subjected to all forms of human rights violations: forced labour, arbitrary arrests, torture and execution are all deployed to quell the slightest protest by the 47 million Burmese, 2 million of whom have already fled to Thailand. With half of the State budget earmarked for the army, this once wealthy nation has been bled white. The ICFTU, which has ceaselessly denounced the very serious human and trade union rights violations in the country, maintains that no connivance with the Burmese regime can be justified. And it is calling for a halt to all foreign investment and the withdrawal of those multinationals present in the country which, like TotalFinaElf, are providing the dictatorship with foreign currency reserves enabling it to maintain its iron grip on the country. Report and personal accounts.

A people exploited at will

Burma's massive use of forced labour by its citizens has earned the country repeated international condemnation. However, the military regime's negative attitudes have so far prevented any major reductions in forced labour.

This is a major concern for the ICFTU. Not a single day goes by in Burma without the army forcing hundreds of thousands of men, women, children and even the elderly to work against their will, generally without payment. The work ranges from road and railway construction and maintenance, to serving as messengers for troops and labouring in the fields confiscated by the army from farmers.



Women, children and old people: no-one is spared from forced labour in Burma. (Photo: KHRG)

In most cases the forced workers have to bring their own equipment and food with them. The most dreaded form of forced labour is that of "army porters", who carry very heavy loads of weapons and supplies for hours on end through

Abbreviations used

FTUB: Federation of Trade Unions-Burma
FTUK: Federation of Trade Unions Kawthoolei
NLD: National League for Democracy
SPDC: State Peace and Development Council
SLORC: State Law and Order Restoration Council
ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

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the hills, sometimes across combat zones. Starved, beaten or even killed if they can no longer keep up or if they try to escape, the porters also have to walk in front of the soldiers, so they are the first to stumble over anti-personnel mines. They are even used as human shields during exchanges of fire. Women and children are not spared this form of work either, though it is mainly men who are requisitioned.

It has taken years for the military regime to recognise the existence of forced labour, though now it is confirming that it is taking place "against its wishes"! The SPDC claims that it is issuing orders to stop the use of forced labour, but that it does not "always" manage to get these orders applied by local army officers. Maung Maung, General Secretary of the FTUB explains: "When a high-level ILO delegation went to Burma, the SPDC had already implemented a detailed plan to ensure that every village was informed about its likely arrival. The local inhabitants knew they should reply "no" if foreigners asked them whether there was any forced labour. There is nothing to stop the regime setting up a similar information campaign highlighting their orders to stop forced labour, but the truth is that it does not intend to implement those orders and simply wants to make the international community believe it is addressing the problem. Examples of punishment of army officers who imposed forced labour on civilians are few



The most feared type of forced labour is portering: porters are beaten or even killed by soldiers if they fail to keep up. (Photo: KHRG)

and far between."

ILO ESCORT TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

Bowing to international pressure, in March 2002 the dictatorship agreed to the posting of an ILO liaison officer in Burma. According to the agreement that person would be allowed to take all

necessary measures to ensure the quick and effective eradication of forced labour in the country, and be provided with all essential means and support to that effect. Whilst the officer and her assistant are indeed allowed to move freely around the country, they are accompanied by an escort ostensibly charged with ensuring their safety. In her report to the last ILO Governing Body meeting the liaison officer, Mrs. Perret-Nguyen, stressed that in accordance with prior arrangements she was escorted, on her freely arranged visits, by a police car which kept a good distance from her own vehicle and waited at the entrance to villages she visited. However, she was "concerned" at having been closely followed by 2 men on a motorbike, who attempted to listen in on private conversations she held with local people, despite her protests and interventions by her police escorts.

So has international pressure helped reduce the use of forced labour? "In a sense, yes", replies Maung Maung. "When a team of ILO experts arrived in the Mandalay region, forced labour was stopped there for the duration of the visit, but shortly afterwards it was resumed. Now the attention of the ILO Burma office seems to be focusing more on the border region, where they have noted a reduction in forced labour. So it has not stopped in practice, and the FTUB is regularly getting videos and photos of forced labour, along with copies of orders from army officers issuing orders for forced workers". The

Porter pushed off a cliff for falling sick

Udahdi, a 46-year old Karen, is the father of three children and has been a refugee for 6 months in Thailand. Forced labour was the main reason for his decision to leave on foot, with his wife, children and grandmother, and cover the 30 kilometres of mountains separating his village from the Thai border: "I was called on roughly once a month to do forced labour as a porter in Burma, and it lasted 5, 10 or 15 days, or even up to a month. During that time I couldn't look after my field, of course. If a porter tried to escape and was captured he would be killed. I witnessed two

such murders by SPDC troops: one because the porter had tried to escape and the other because the man was ill and could no longer carry his load – he was pushed off a cliff by a soldier. I was a porter but other people in my village were forced to repair army buildings, or to build or repair roads, etc. To avoid doing forced labour we had to pay fines to the local authorities of 500 kyats (about 50 US cents) per day to avoid working in a camp, 1000 a day to avoid building work, and over 1000 a day to avoid working as a porter. Often 15-year old children have to go and work, for example when their fathers are ill or have died".

ILO's liaison officer also stresses in her report that even though the orders prohibiting forced labour have been widely (though unevenly) distributed, they have a limited impact in practice. The army officers sometimes try to camouflage the use of forced labour by paying very low wages to some workers, or by issuing requisition orders orally. They also avoid using it in areas with a relatively large international presence, such as the capital Rangoon.

GOVERNMENT MAKING NO ALTERNATIVE PROVISIONS TO FORCED LABOUR

The very large sums of money allocated by the government to its army (49% of the state budget in 1998/99) are diluted on their way down the hierarchy. In practice the funds scarcely reach most ordinary soldiers, who are underpaid and underfed and consequently supplement their income by preying on civilians. As long as this method of distributing the military budget is used it will be very hard to reduce forced labour and the abuses carried on by the soldiers. An international official based in Rangoon stated that there is "currently no basis for reducing the use of forced labour" and that it "really isn't acceptable for soldiers to be using fields confiscated from civilians as a source of food for themselves. The same applies to the army's use of porters: most soldiers are not forcing civilians to work because they enjoy doing so but because they do not have proper transport available. In mountainous regions near

A breakthrough at last?

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) announced on 14 May that it had reached an agreement with Burma to appoint a facilitator charged with helping the victims of forced labour to obtain compensation. In a letter to U Tin Winn, the Minister of Labour, the Director-General of the ILO Juan Somavia welcomed this official agreement negotiated with Rangoon. He asked the military regime to implement the promised action plan "as soon as possible", including "choosing a venue for

carrying out a pilot project" involving the building of a road. The other components of the plan consist of finding ways of replacing forced labour and starting an awareness-raising campaign. Mr Somavia stated, at the annual International Labour Conference which opened in early June in Geneva, that he wanted to examine with the Burmese delegation the practical implementation of this plan. That includes the ILO's request that Rangoon establish an effective verification system for assessing alleged cases of forced labour.

the border there are hardly any roads and the battalions stationed there have very few helicopters and use civilians to carry their equipment through the jungle". Mrs. Perret-Nguyen's report also stresses that the government has not provided any alternatives for those people currently responsible for imposing forced labour.

To improve the chances of significantly reducing the scale of forced labour, the FTUB would like the ILO to open several permanent offices in sensitive parts of the country (i.e. in Rangoon for the Delta and Pegu region, but

also in Mandalay for the Upper Burma region and Moulmein for Lower Burma), each with a phone line that Burmese people could call, in their own language and on a 24-hour basis, to signal any cases of forced labour that crop up. Up till now the ILO only has one office, in Rangoon. The FTUB has passed on the contact details of this office via various foreign radio programmes that can be picked up in Burma, but people are scared to go there directly.

Unless there is a change of heart by the government, there is no chance of significantly reducing the amount of forced labour in Burma. ●

Aung San Suu Kyi arrested once again

Military junta confirms arrest of opposition leader for her own "protection"

Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the main anti-junta opposition movement in Burma, has once again been placed under arrest. She was last detained for 19 months (ending in May 2002), but since then had been allowed to leave the capital of Rangoon on several occasions. This time, Aung San Suu Kyi was in the northern part of the country on a one-month trip to meet with local people and attend the opening of NLD regional offices. During the trip clashes broke out on 31 May between supporters of the NLD and followers of the junta. According to the

government, the violence led to four deaths and dozens of injured persons, but the opposition groups say that dozens of people died in the violence.

Since it is impossible for foreign journalists to work normally in Burma and very difficult to communicate with that country, it is hard to gain an accurate assessment of what exactly happened on 31 May. According to eyewitness testimony collected by opposition leaders in exile, State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) henchmen urged certain individuals (disguised as monks and students) to attack the convoy which included the car in which Aung San Suu Kyi was travelling. It is rumoured that the Nobel Peace Prize laureate was injured during the attack, but this has been denied by the government and so far cannot be confirmed by independent sources. However, the

SPDC has acknowledged that Aung San Suu Kyi has been under arrest since 31 May. It maintains that this is a temporary measure whose only purpose is to "protect her" from fresh outbursts of violence. This argument is hard to accept, given the ultra-repressive policies pursued by the dictatorship – especially since it has not said how long she will remain under arrest.

Since 31 May the NLD's offices in Rangoon and dozens of others around the country have been closed down by the SPDC, senior officials have been arrested or placed under house arrest, and phone lines have been cut. Levels of trust between the SPDC and the NLD – thoroughly weakened in recent months due to the impasse in the dialogue begun after Aung San Suu Kyi was last released – has plummeted to zero. ●

Climate of terror

As with all dictatorships, the Burmese regime survives in part due to its reign of terror over the population. There are neighbours spying on each another and black lists as well as the threat of torture and execution looming over those who – even verbally – oppose the regime.

Knowing the nature of the regime, foreigners landing in Burma might expect to have regular sightings of soldiers and police officers on the streets of Rangoon or in the tourist areas they will visit. But there are none: as a rule, the forces of Burma's military junta, the SPDC, are relatively discrete in the areas popular with foreign tourists. Despite the small number of police and soldiers visible on the streets of Rangoon or in tourist areas, all Burmese people are constantly being watched. In every village and on every street in urban centres, one or more people close to the SPDC are responsible for monitoring the activities of other residents: Do they speak out against the government? Are they meeting with opponents of the government? Do they have contact with foreigners? Befriending a foreigner is not a crime in itself in Burma unless the SPDC later becomes

aware that this foreigner is a journalist, photographer, social researcher or so forth.

The Burmese are therefore constantly under surveillance, and all of them are afraid of one day ending up on the 'black list' of people the SPDC advises avoiding. Being on the dictatorship's records does not always involve going to prison but can mean that people lose their means of subsistence. For example, a shopkeeper will find that his customers are warned by the regime's henchmen that it would be better for them to avoid shopping in his store, a teacher loses his job, a tourist guide his licence, a father, even, the right to enroll his child in a university and so on. "Since my husband and I were active in opposing the government in the political arena, our son was unable to find regular employment in Burma and so he had to emigrate to Thailand", explains Khin, a 50-year-old woman living in the Shan State (see page 8). "Personally, I was beaten by the soldiers of an ethnic army who signed a cease-fire agreement with the SPDC. They tied me up and dragged me behind a car, and beat me harshly on the neck. I still suffer from the after-effects of these beatings but I have no money for treatment."

Several laws severely repress any attempt to use freedom of expression to even mildly criticise the SPDC. According to Amnesty International, 1,200 political prisoners continue to be held in

the country and the rate of prisoners being released has considerably slowed in recent months. During each crisis or occurrence which may encourage the people to rebel (food crisis, banking crisis, etc.), the SPDC also takes care to erect barb wire in sensitive areas of the cities, to make their intentions clear, 'just in case'. "I am not sure that all these measures are absolutely necessary", a Burmese scientist living in Rangoon comments. "For the vast majority of people living in this country, their main concern is simply staying alive one more week. Believe you me, it is anything but easy with the sort of incomes we receive. As for political protests, everyone who has tried it has been killed, imprisoned or forced to go into exile abroad. It makes you think."

In its desire to control the freedom of expression of an entire people, the SPDC has gone as far as committing a major new political blunder this year: it bugged the room in which the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar from the UN Human Rights Commission, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, was meeting with political prisoners from the Insein prison in Rangoon. Realising that there were listening devices, the rapporteur announced on 24 March that he was cutting short his mission. This was a further setback for the regime, since Pinheiro had been a dialogue partner who favoured the softly-softly approach rather than confrontation. ●

Wasted youth

Burma always used to place a strong emphasis on education but today it is reduced to watching its children work from dawn until dusk to help their families survive.

The small chairs on the teashop terraces are in high demand among the Burmese. Day and night, they squeeze in to unwind, and day and night they are served by children. "I left my village because my parents couldn't make ends meet", explains Myo, a waiter in a Rangoon teashop. Although he is 13 years old, he barely looks eight. "I work here every day from 12 noon until 6 p.m. or from 5 p.m. until 2 in the morning. I



Myo, 13 years old, has come to work as a waiter in Rangoon because his parents could no longer pay his school fees (Photo: S.G.)

earn 3,500 kyats per month (around \$3.5). The owner provides room and board. Some day I hope to be able to save enough to buy my own teashop and employ others". If nothing changes in Burma between now and then, those employees will undoubtedly be children too: in the economic context created by bad management on the part of the military, most Burmese are quite used to seeing children working.

Myo is still lucky enough to 'only' have to work six hours a day in a relatively safe environment. Opposite the infamous Insein prison, where many political prisoners are held, a teashop employs a 14-year-old waiter who works seven days a week, from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m., for 4,500 kyats a month. "I have no choice: my father is dead

and I have three brothers and sisters. My mother cannot feed us all unless we work". Even worse than this: in a glass factory on the outskirts of Rangoon, children start work at the age of 14 for 300 kyats (around \$0.3) per day, with absolutely no protective gear although they work with molten glass all day long. In the same workshop, women return to work only days after giving birth, keeping an eye on their babies who sit in the heat and dust a few metres from the ovens.

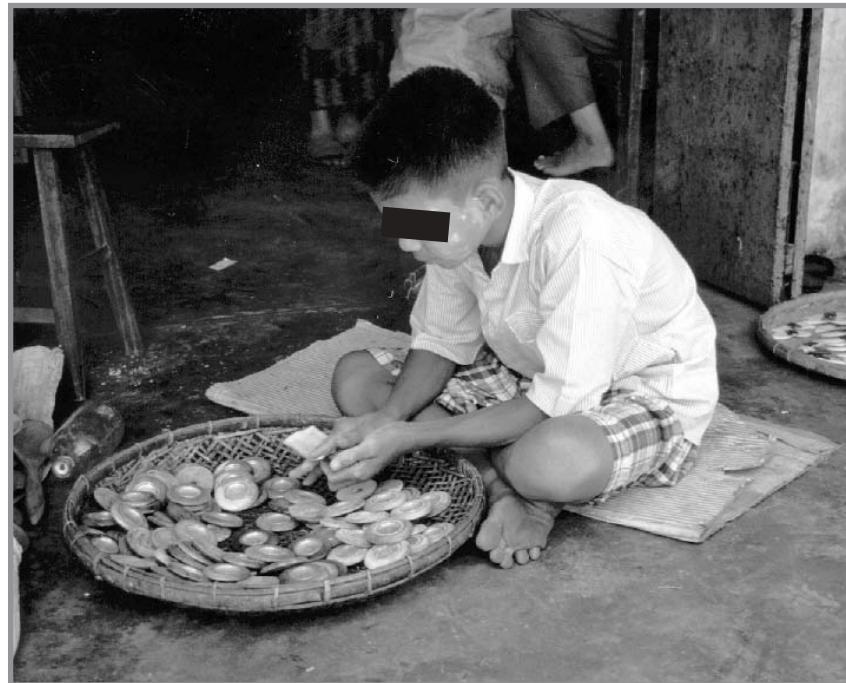
LARGEST NUMBER OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN THE WORLD

The worst forms of child labour are widespread in Burma, which has not ratified ILO Convention No.182 on this issue. Forced recruitment of children into the army is a common practice. According to a report by Human Rights Watch published in 2002, Burma has the largest number of child soldiers in the world with around 20% of Tatmadaw forces (the name of the Burmese army) made up of youths under 18 (1).

Boys aged as young as 11 or 12 are taken away by recruiters while waiting alone at bus stops or train stations or elsewhere and are forced to learn to fight before joining battalions. They are severely punished if they try to escape; sometimes they are beaten to death. "I have seen children aged 13 and 14 in the army", explains a former porter, now a refugee in northern Thailand. "One day, I had a chance to speak to one of them and he started to cry when he told me his story. He was press-ganged into the army. His parents weren't even told and don't know where he is. Child soldiers have to carry weapons which are far too heavy for them, and walk long distances. They are beaten by the officers if they cannot keep up. We were often beaten by soldiers, including children, but I don't blame them, it's their superiors who are making them do it".

FORCED TO TAKE EVENING CLASSES

Many children also work as domestics and in the construction and agriculture sectors. The vast majority of Burmese dream of sending their children to school but the indirect costs of schooling are too high, even for primary education, and salaries too low to ensure the survival of households. Aside from uniforms and school supplies, the pupils need to pay towards the teachers' income: primary school teachers earn just \$5 per month, secondary school teachers between \$6 and \$8 while a minimum of \$50 to \$100 is needed each month to feed a family in Burma (depending on its size



The arrival of tourists in Burma is a direct source of income for the regime, though also for a few small businesses. Here, in Pegu, an 11-year old boy is sorting out some souvenirs he will try to sell to tourists, to help out his parents. He has only had two years schooling. (Photo: S.G.)

and the quality of food), not to mention other costs. Most of the teachers therefore only give a brief lesson on the theory during normal class hours so that pupils are forced to take their evening classes which cost \$3 to \$6 per month per pupil. Some parents hold down two jobs (for example working during the day and then driving a taxi at night) to offer their children an education, but that becomes very difficult if the number of children increases. Furthermore, the prospects for finding a job after earning a qualification remain dim for the moment. As a result, according to government figures for 1999, only 75% of children aged 5 to 9 go to school, 35% of those 10-13 and barely 26% of 14-15 year olds!

Child soldiers have to carry weapons which are far too heavy for them, and walk long distances. They are beaten by the officers if they cannot keep up.

The higher the level of education, the worse the situation gets. Universities were regularly shut during the 1990s to curb the development of new

hotbeds of protest against the government, as was seen in the 1980s. They had been reopened in June 2000, but on 2 June 2003, the start of a new term, they were again closed for an indefinite period after violence erupted in the north of the country (see page 3). Since 2000, lesson times had been cut back considerably, partly to cater for the large number of students who had been going there for several years. There is a lack of teachers in sciences and foreign languages because they prefer to work in the private sector where qualified people can earn a decent salary. 'Small gifts' from students are most welcome during exam time and even essential in certain subjects if students want to receive a diploma whose value, given the type of system, is more than dubious.

This is the result of the policy of a government which spends six times less on education than it does on its army. ●

(1) There are presently around 450,000 men in the Tatmadaw, which is one of the largest armies in Southeast Asia despite the fact there is no external threat to the country.

Note: This year, the ICFTU will publish a report on the situation of Burmese children living in Burma and as refugees in Thailand. You can order it from in advance by writing to press@icftu.org or by mail to ICFTU .

Foreign businesses support government

Foreign investment in Burma contributes to the harsh realities which the Burmese people suffer every day, including forced labour. Nevertheless, companies continue to endure the difficulties imposed by poor management of the country and exploit Burmese workers to the full.

In the late 1980s, the military dictatorship decided to open Burma up to foreign investors. It is reaping direct benefits: part of the currency brought in by investors falls into the hands of the dictators through bribes, the purchase of licences (for a phone line, fax, electricity, etc.), the unfavourable exchange rate applied to official transactions or via other ploys. This desire to attract foreign investment has been used as justification for forced labour, as condemned by the FTUB in its report on the Burmese economy in June 2002: "In developing infrastructure for both the tourist and the oil and gas industries, the junta has extensively used forced labour under extremely harsh conditions. Fees and profits from tapping Burma's natural gas resources go straight to the generals. Some hotel projects are also in partnership with the generals, and front companies reportedly run others for major heroin dealers



Leading clothing manufacturers can get Burmese factories to produce their labels at extremely low prices: the wage of non-skilled workers is no more than 10 to 15 dollars per month in some firms. (Photo: S.G.)

who are collaborating with the generals."

The main areas in which foreigners invest in Burma are energy (gas and oil), the manufacturing sector, hotels, tourism, real estate and mining. Investors mainly come from ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Thailand,

Malaysia and Indonesia as well as from the United Kingdom, the United States, France, the Netherlands, Japan and South Korea (1). The FTUB report explains that since 1990, while ASEAN countries pledged to invest \$4.26 billion and Western countries \$2.89 billion, the latter invested 80% of what it had promised compared with around 31% for the ASEAN countries. As such, most foreign investment in Burma emanates from Western countries.

Bargains for the Thai prime minister

Relations between Burma and neighbouring Thailand were extremely strained in 2001 shortly after Prime Minister Thaksin came to power in Bangkok. Some shells were even fired just north of the border between the two countries. Since then, relations have improved spectacularly – indeed to such an extent that at the end of 2002, Thailand tightened its stranglehold on Burmese opponents on its territory, to the satisfaction of Rangoon. Are these closer relations between the two governments due simply to diplomacy? It would very naïve to

believe that. In May 2002, the Thai company Shin Satellite signed a contract to provide telecommunications services for Burmese villages, many of which have no phone lines. Shin Satellite is a company affiliated to the telecommunications group Shin Corporation, which is controlled by Prime Minister Thaksin's family. The contract worth \$12 million was signed with the semi-government company Bagan Cybertech and has been implemented on the ground in cooperation with the government company Myanmar Post and Telecom. All profits therefore go to the company's military backers ... and into Mr Thaksin's own pocket.

BARRIERS TO BUSINESS

Several large companies have decided to withdraw from Burma in recent years (Triumph, Accor, etc.), partly due to the pressure of public opinion in the West but also (and especially) because it was almost impossible to operate 'normally' in Burma. Obstacles to the smooth running of business included fluctuations in the exchange rate: while the official rate is 6.2 kyats to the dollar, the black market rate which everyone in the street uses (as well as the official bureau de change in Rangoon's tourist office!) is around 900 or 1,000 kyats to the dollar, and the rate for business transactions should be around 400 kyats although there is differing information on this (some companies with close ties to the government are permitted to use exchange rates which are closer to the street rate).

There are other barriers to business, too: the road infrastructure is extremely dilapidated, air travel within the country is not advised due to frequent accidents, and there are regular power cuts. Money placed in banks cannot always be withdrawn as banks do not always have enough kyats, forcing companies to temporarily shut their doors because they are unable to pay their workers. Corruption is widespread and the repatriation of any profits can be erratic: for example, since it is unable to change its kyats into dollars, a major Canadian cigarette manufacturer is forced to use its kyats to buy food products in Burma and export them to Hong Kong, where it resells them for dollars.

APPALLING WAGES

So why do companies invest in Burma? Among the most attractive factors for unscrupulous companies are low wages and a ban on all trade union activity (see page 9). For example, the Myanmar Joon-A International textile company, based in Rangoon and fully owned by South Koreans, pays its workers between 10,000 and 15,000 kyats per month, or around \$10 to \$15 (2). It is impossible to have a decent standard of living in Burma on such a salary but it is still three times more than a civil service employee earns. The complete indifference of the Burmese government to the plight of workers also encourages some investors to neglect basic regulations on health, safety and the environment. Working conditions are even worse in local companies.

Pitiful wages, no trade unions and non-application of regulations on working conditions and the environment are therefore helping to attract investors

PRIORITY TO THE ARMY

The dictatorship's official newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*, dedicates whole pages each day to praising the merits of the government and its social 'achievements'. While it may be true that the SPDC has financed the opening of a school or clinic, these are only tiny drops in an ocean of abject poverty suffered by the Burmese people as a result of SPDC policy. A quick glance at the State's budget is very revealing: during the period 1998-99, the SPDC spent 49.93% of its budget on the army, only 6.98% on education and 2.6% on healthcare. Among its major purchases, the regime paid a deposit of \$40 million

for ten Russian MIG-29 fighter planes in 2001 (they will cost \$130 million in total).

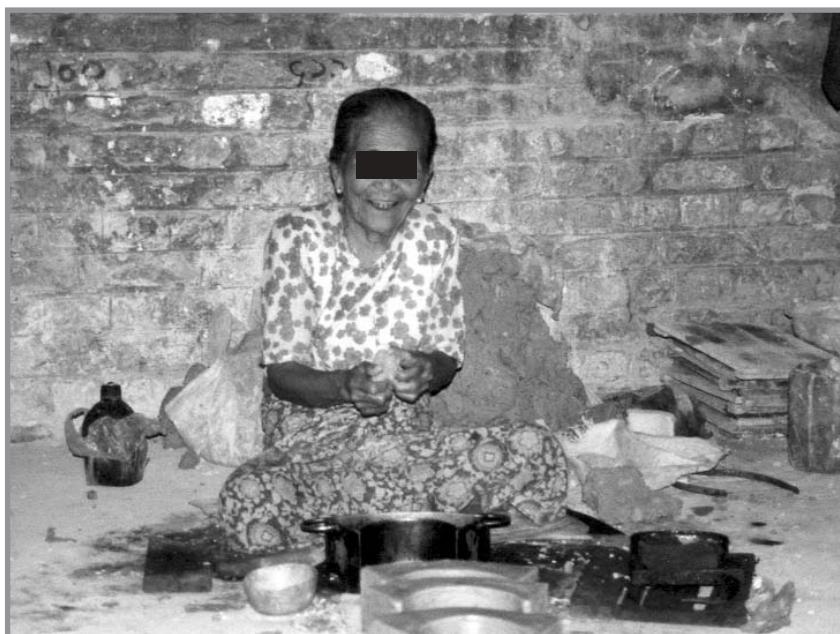
Over the last ten years, the number of Burmese army soldiers has increased by 242% from 186,000 in 1988 to 450,000 in 1999. "Why do they need so many soldiers?", asks Min Lwin, a FTUB representative in Mae Sot (a Thai town on the Burmese border). "Since 17 armed opposition groups signed the ceasefire, there are only 3 armed groups in opposition. However, in 2002, 50 battalions were added to the army with around 15,000 soldiers." This means more mouths to feed and more wages to pay (around \$5 per month per soldier) ...

and their currency, which in turn help keep the military junta in power, to Burma. For this reason, the ICFTU and Burmese trade unions are supporting the view held by Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy. She recently reaffirmed her call for the strictest international sanctions to restore democracy to the country. "It is worrying to see that one of the most brutal dictatorships in the world is continuing to receive support from foreign companies," says Guy Ryder, ICF-TU General Secretary. "We are asking these companies to cut their ties with Burma immediately and are calling for governments to take stronger action to

stop investment in the country and to allow democracy to be reinstated." ●

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(1) The Global Unions group maintains an up-to-date list of companies which have business links with the dictatorship. It is available on the Internet at <http://www.global-unions.org/burma>.

(2) It employs 1,300 at present, mostly young women, and its South Korean director plans to increase the number of employees to 1,500 in the very near future: although orders from some European customers have slowed due to fear of Burma's image, business in general is doing well with many well-known global brands sourcing jumpers, sportswear, etc. from the company.



This 80-year old woman works ten hours per day, six days a week, modelling bricks in a factory in the centre of Burma. She manages to make about 50 bricks a day and is paid 7 kyats for each. Her daily wage is therefore less than half a dollar. "Of course it's not enough but it helps my family a bit, she says. We are living in poverty. The workshop is badly lit and there is a lot of dust. My eyes are always hurting". No unions, no labour inspectorate and no labour legislation worthy of the name... Burma is a paradise for unscrupulous employers but a nightmare for workers. (Photo: S.G.)

Taxes, taxes and more taxes

The military regime in Burma, the SPDC, seems to be using the tactic of keeping the population in abject poverty so that they are more preoccupied with daily survival than any thoughts of rebellion.

HT he sun set long ago. Now, we're waiting for the dawn". Khin (1), a 50-year-old women who lives in a village in the south of Shan state, is not in the habit of criticising the military junta by name, not even on a visit to her family in Thailand: given the widespread repression, you can never be too careful. However, during the two hours we spent with her, Khin, a sympathiser of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the NLD, was brave enough to tell us about the litany of abuse suffered by the villagers in her region. "We are harassed by both SPDC soldiers and soldiers from the former armed opposition group who signed a cease-fire with them. Both regularly demand forced labourers or donations of rice or a few dollars per family. This might happen once a month, every other month or sometimes several times in the same month. It just depends. And then there are all these taxes that the local authorities are continually inventing and which push us ever further into poverty. For example, in January 2002, every family had to give 10,000 kyats (around USD 10) for building a road. And if you have a visitor in your home, you need to pay 50 kyats per day if it's a child, 100 kyats if it's an adult. There is a fine of 500 kyats for not reporting the visit to the authorities. I even had to pay for my own mother's visit! Each family in my village has also had to pay 10,000 kyats three times over to equip the village with electricity but we still have none. Where has our money gone? It's like the time the families had to pay a 650-kyat contribution towards the purchase of a fire engine: we didn't see hide nor hair of the fire engine but the village head bought himself a new car!"

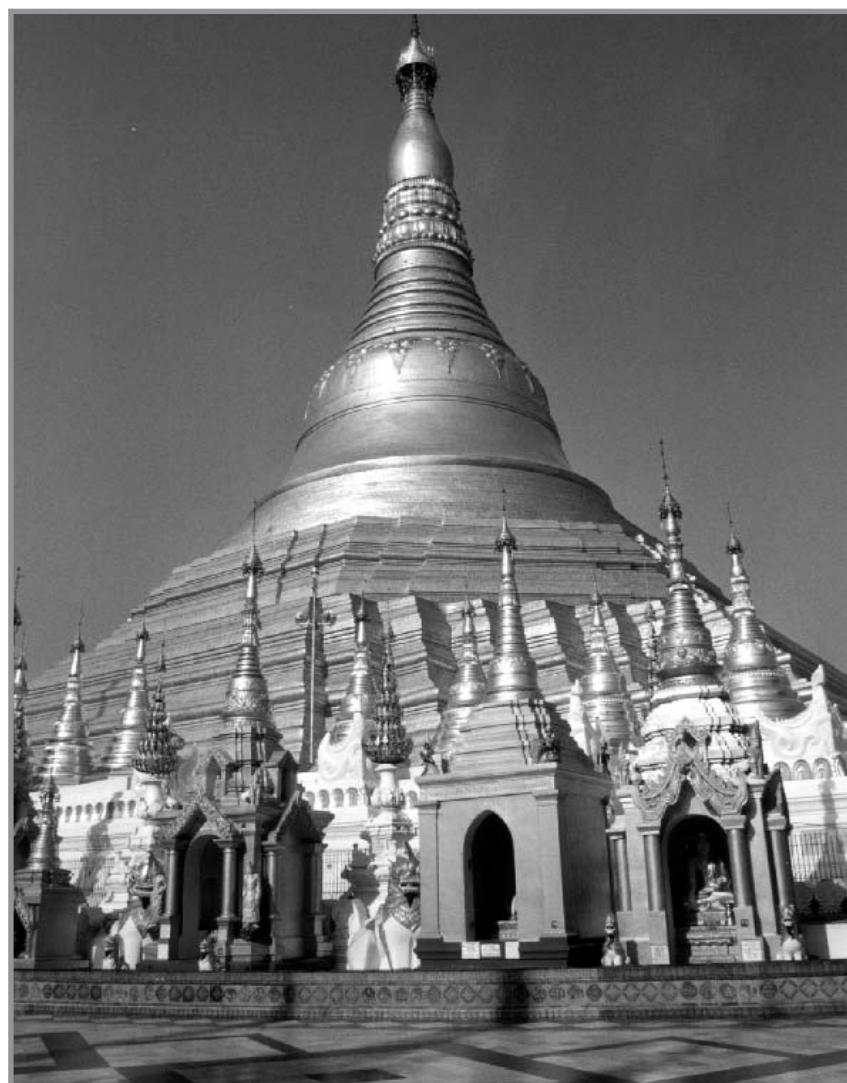
Khin's is a good illustration of the harassment suffered by all those living in Burma, especially in the ethnic areas located far from Rangoon. Throughout the country, the government forces peasants to sell it part of their harvests at considerably lower than market price. Using this system, the quotas of products to be sold are set even before harvesting has taken place. This means that if an acre (0.4 hectares) of paddy-fields produces 30 to 40 baskets of rice (one basket of rice weighs around 23 kg) per harvest, the SPDC demands that 10

to 12 of the baskets are sold to it at a price 5 to 10 times lower than the market price for rice. The government is supposed to be building up food reserves to be distributed in times of hardship, but several witnesses have seen lorries loaded with rice crossing Burma's borders, especially the border with Bangladesh, and assume that at least some of the reserves have been exported by the regime while almost everywhere in the country, people are going hungry from lack of rice.

The unfair system of selling quotas at reduced prices has been maintained this year despite the fact that floods in October and November 2002, followed by five days of continual rain in January 2003, have considerably reduced the harvests. "There have been floods in other countries such as Thailand but the government there intervened to help those affected", emphasises Maung

Maung, General Secretary of the FTUB. "Nothing like that has been done in Burma, quite the opposite: some peasants have been cruelly beaten by soldiers because they could not sell them the quota set in advance. What can these defenceless peasants do when their crops have been destroyed by the floods? They are terrified because if they fail to sell the quota to the government, they are likely to lose the right to farm their land. It's a ridiculous system. They are acting as if a farmer's harvest can be predicted in the same way as industrial production". While top SPDC dignitaries are gorging themselves on the finest of fare, peasants have been forced to borrow the money to buy rice which they then sell on to the government to meet their quotas. ●

(1) For obvious security reasons, we have changed Khin's name and are unable to give the village where she lives.



To attract foreign tourists, the dictatorship has repaired a large number of historical sites, using forced labour. (Photo: S.G.)

Merciless repression of trade unions

The non-respect of union rights in Burma is straightforward: unions are prohibited in law and collective bargaining does not exist. The military junta uses sackings, detentions and even torture to prevent any attempts at protest. Free trade unions, such as the independent Federation of Trade Unions-Burma (FTUB) and the Kawthoolei Education Workers' Union (KEWU) therefore have to operate underground. When captured, their leaders are sentenced to heavy prison terms or assassinated. On 4 August 2002, U Saw Mya Than, a member of the FTUB and of the KEWU, was shot dead by SPDC soldiers in retaliation for an ambush set by forces opposed to the regime, whilst he was being forced to work as a porter for the SPDC. A union leader, Than Naing, was imprisoned for life in 1989 for playing a leading role in forming strike committees during the 1988 democracy uprising, which was violently crushed by the military.

Two members of the central Executive Committee of the FTUB have been imprisoned since 1997. U Myo Aung Thant was arrested with his wife and children and sentenced to life imprisonment for "high treason" on trumped-up charges. His conviction rested on a confession obtained under torture, his trial was held in secret and he had no legal counsel. His wife was sentenced in the same trial to ten years in prison as an accomplice to her husband. U Kyin Kyaw, another member of the central Executive Committee of the FTUB was also arrested with his wife in 1997. He had already been charged for union activities in 1993 and had been tortured in prison. The authori-



Trade unionist U Myo Aung Thant (pictured here to the right of the General Secretary of the FTUB, Maung Maung) has been serving a life imprisonment term since 1997 on the charge of "high treason", following confessions extracted from him under torture (Photo: FTUB)

ties have never stated the charges under which he is currently held but it is known that his case is related to that of U Myo Aung Thant. He is serving a 17-year prison sentence in Thayarwaddy prison in Pegu division and his health is poor.

Despite the repression, several Burmese unions have managed to penetrate the country and conduct operations there from abroad. For example, they use various foreign radio stations that can be picked up in Burma (BBC, Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, etc.) to transmit uncensored information to the people.

They collect information on the working and living conditions of workers and pass it on to international trade union organisations such as the ICFTU. "In regions where it is possible, we are also organising trade union training courses", explains Dot Lay Mu, General Secretary of the FTUK. "Inhabitants of villages are very interested to hear what is going on elsewhere. We also explain about international bodies defending workers' rights, which convinces them of the importance of the information they are passing on to us". ●

Burma faces a new official complaint from the ICFTU to the ILO

On 28 May the ICFTU lodged a new complaint against Burma's military government to the Committee on Freedom of Association of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), this time for the systematic violation of the Convention on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, ratified by Burma in 1955. It describes in detail how the convention has been violated both in law and practice. Various legal texts are quoted by the ICFTU as evidence of this violation, in particular Order 6/88, a military decree issued on 30 September 1988 which compels all

organisations to "apply for permission to form" to the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs. Those breaching the decree risk a five-year jail term. In practice, legislation in place after four decades of military rule has left the country "without any functioning industrial relations system", says the ICFTU complaint. It adds that anyone who challenges the arbitrary power of the military "faces arrest, violence and possibly death" (see article above). The complete denial of trade union rights and horrendous working conditions, especially in the export-oriented textile industry, are also described in the complaint, which details violent repression of strikes in several factories in recent years. It also denounces the situation faced by

Burmese seafarers serving on foreign ships, who are prevented by law from contacting the London-based International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) in order to protect their interests. Seafarers returning to Burma after obtaining the settlement of back-wages with ITF assistance have faced imprisonment and confiscation of their earnings. The complaint states that the ICFTU "believes strongly in the work of the ILO Liaison Officer that is being carried out in the field of forced labour in Burma". However, it adds that, "nothing sustainable and serious can be achieved in this regard if ... obstacles to organise are not lifted".

Government burns down hundreds of villages

According to our sources, there are between 600,000 and 1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Burma, the vast majority of whom have been forced to leave their villages by SPDC troops who use this tactic to empty and control areas populated by ethnic groups reputedly hostile to the government in Rangoon. In cases of forced displacement, the soldiers generally give the inhabitants of a village one week to move by their own means to a relocation site. This site will often be located close to military barracks (where the villagers are put into forced labour) and consist of an expanse of land with absolutely no buildings. Relocation sites are rarely equipped

with education or medical infrastructure and displaced persons are not allowed to leave the sites without a military escort. Once the one-week notice period has elapsed, the soldiers seize the goods left behind by the villagers and destroy their houses and crops to dissuade them from returning home.

A considerable number of victims of forced displacement attempt to escape life in the relocation sites by hiding in the jungle where they need to be continually on the move to avoid being tracked down by government soldiers. No-one knows exactly how many such jungle refugees there are, but well-informed non-governmental organisations estimate the number at 120,000

for the Karen ethnic group alone, not to mention other groups such as the Karen, Shans, Mons and Rohingya. Some hide in jungle areas close to their old village where they try to return from time to time to cultivate what may be left, at the risk of detonating antipersonnel mines planted by the SPDC. Living conditions in the jungle are, of course, extremely difficult but some villagers still manage to start mini-schools which follow them in their movements. Several non-governmental organisations and Burmese trade unions in exile send brave members through the jungles with sacks of medicine and school supplies, which they hand out to the displaced persons. ●

Manhunt in the jungle

The story of Zaw, a 40-year-old man, is typical of the experience of those Burmese forcibly displaced from one region to another by the military junta. We met Zaw in a refugee camp in Thailand.

Before being forcibly displaced, I was a farmer and chief of the Pla-kee village in the region where the Karen live. Two or three times a week I would have to work as a porter for the army, build roads, cut bamboo and so on. My village no longer exists because all the people living there were forced to move elsewhere by SPDC soldiers. They torched the village in 1997 and ordered us to move to another place which was a day's walk from the village. They promised us they would give us food there. In actual fact, we were only given food for 12 days. After that, we had to find our own means but we had no fields left to cultivate. There was no school and no clinic in this place. The soldiers forced my family to stay there and told me I had to serve the government: sometimes I had to do construction work or return with them to my former village to try to find villagers who had stayed in vicinity, hiding in the jungle. There were sometimes skirmishes with soldiers from the Karen army and one of my friends from the village was killed in one of these incidents. The SPDC soldiers had given us



Zaw has hidden in the jungle with his family for months, in order to escape SPDC soldiers. After his wife died whilst giving birth deep in the jungle, he decided to flee to Thailand (Photo: S.G.)

weapons but no ammunition. I was terrified and I finally escaped into the jungle.

My family, who could no longer carry on because they were given nothing to eat, joined me in the jungle. We were continually on the run because the SPDC troops shoot villagers hiding in the jungle and destroy our huts. One day, soldiers discovered the shelter

where my family and I were hiding. They opened fire on the shelter then they burned it down. Our clothes and food were destroyed so we wandered like animals in the jungle eating what we found there. My wife was pregnant and she was forced to give birth in the jungle because we didn't dare leave. She did not survive labour. I was alone in the jungle with my wife and my children during the delivery and I had no medicine to help her. All I could do was spread hot water over her body to help but it wasn't enough, she was too weak.

The baby survived for six months after the birth but in the end he died as well due to lack of food. It was at this point that I decided to cross the jungle to come to Thailand with my three remaining children. It was our only chance of survival. I was unable to do this earlier because only one of my children was old enough to walk and I would have needed to carry the others which would have been impossible over such a long distance. I started out when my baby died, with two children on my back and one walking next to me. I had no map but a man gave me directions. I tried to remember how many mountains and valleys I had to cross and where to change direction to reach Thailand. I got lost several times. After travelling for a month, we arrived here in 1999. My children are now safe and well. They can go to school in the refugee camp where we live. ●

Healthcare system in death throes

The desperate lack of investment in healthcare and doctor training is responsible for thousands of deaths each year in Burma.

With barely 2.6 % of the national government's budget dedicated to the healthcare sector, nobody expects miracles: Burma is one of the worst countries in Asia to be a patient. Life expectancy was 55.8 years for the period 1995-2000 and infant mortality 78 per 1000 in 2000 (1) - and these are only a few of the statistics indicative of a poor healthcare system. Looking inside an average public hospital (normally forbidden to foreigners) gives an idea of just how much is needed: there is for instance no free medicine, no blood bank, no laboratory, electricity, drinking water or ambulance, no sheets, pillows or bedcovers, few staff (and those who are there are unmotivated). When a surgical operation is performed, the patient has to pay for the needles, the thread for stitches,

bribes for the doctors and so on. An operation in a public hospital is supposed to be free but patients rarely leave having paid less than \$100, an astronomical sum in a country where the monthly salary of government employees is around \$5.

Aid from non-governmental organisations remains limited in Burma due both to restrictions imposed on NGOs by the SPDC on extending their activities and to international condemnation of the regime. The death throes of the public sector have led to the development of small private clinics, mainly in the towns. They are often held by doctors from public hospitals seeking to improve their income in the evening or during working hours, but the quality of care and medicine they sell leaves much to be desired. "We earn 7,500 kyats (around \$7.50) per month", explain two doctors from a public hospital near Rangoon. "We can earn eight or ten times more by working in a large private hospital but the government will not let us resign".

Doctors from this hospital, completely demotivated by their salary and working conditions, have no idea of how diseases such as AIDS are transmitted despite the fact they left university barely three years ago. They refuse to set foot in the women's prison near to their hospital which they are supposed to supervise because they say "all the women in that prison are carrying the AIDS virus. We don't dare touch them in case they contaminate us". This is, of course, completely wrong but how can you blame these young doctors for being incompetent when many of their course books date from as far back as 1948 and they have no access to up-to-date documentation using new technology? And as if the lack of training were not enough, doctors can not search for basic scientific information since the Burmese government has banned almost the entire population from accessing the Internet. ●

(1) Source: UNDP, Human Development Report 2002

Will the generals enforce the death penalty?

Burma produces between half and two-thirds of the world's opium and heroin. It is also a major producer of amphetamines. The quantity of drugs produced in Burma has exploded since the SLORC (predecessor to the SPDC) came to power in 1988. Drugs are destined not only for local consumption but also (especially) for export. Thailand, in particular, is complaining about the large quantities of amphetamines distributed across its territory from Burma. Amphetamine abuse is rife amongst Thai teenagers. According to the FTUB, around 60% of heroin brought to the United States originates in Burma (1).

Smallholders improve their standard of living a little by producing poppies, but it is mainly the major traffickers that fill their pockets as well as the generals who protect them. Burma's most infamous drugs baron Khun Sa, and his associate Wei Hsueh-Kang, enjoy a peaceful existence in Rangoon where they carry out their business activities. The United States is pressuring the Burmese government to hand over these two major traffickers but to no



On many placards in Burma the dictators threaten drug traffickers with the death sentence. In fact, they themselves are the guilty parties (Photo: S.G.)

avail. In the meantime, there are large notices all over the streets of Rangoon announcing that "Drug trafficking a serious crime which may lead to the death penalty". As well as poppies, the regime leaders who put up these notices

also seem to be cultivating a certain sense of self-mockery about their activities ... ●

(1) Source: FTUB, Economic Report on Burma, June 2002.

41 years of dictatorship

Where do the dictators in power in Burma come from? What support do they have? We provide some answers to these questions by glancing through the country's turbulent history.

Burma gained independence from the United Kingdom in January 1948 after lengthy negotiations led by General Aung San, who was assassinated six months before independence. A parliamentary democracy was set up after a fashion despite the activity of numerous rebel movements. In 1962, a military coup led by General Ne Win overthrew the government. The new regime set its country on the 'Burmese Way to Socialism', which led to economic catastrophe and was coupled with a drastic reduction in civil and political rights. In 1987 and 1988, there were mass demonstrations calling for the departure of Ne Win. He retired in July 1988, but it was too late to quell popular unrest. The demonstrations continued, including one particular demonstration on 8 August 1988 during which the military opened fire on a crowd of unarmed protestors. The exact number of deaths brought about by this reckless act of repression will never be known, but it certainly runs into the thousands. The army stayed in power and in September 1988, the newly cre-



The Nobel Peace Prize winner and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, advocates passive resistance and calls for stronger economic sanctions against the regime. She was again arrested on 31 May 2003.

ated State Law and Order Restoration Council (more widely known as the SLORC) introduced martial law. It abandoned the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' and opened up the economy to the private sector and foreign investment.

Elections were organised in 1990, the first for over 30 years. They resulted in a landslide victory for the NLD (National League for Democracy), founded by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, which walked away with 392 of the 485 seats to be filled despite a series of military manoeuvres. The army did not respect the verdict. It invaded the offices of the NLD and arrested its main leaders. In the 1990s, the dictatorship further consolidated its hold on power by winning important victories against the Karen and Mon rebels along the border with Thailand and by signing cease-fires with 17 other armed ethnic groups (1). Aung San Suu Kyi has been awarded the most prestigious international accolades, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, but being under house arrest she was unable to receive them in person. In November 1997, a reorganisation within the regime transformed the SLORC into the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) but in practice there was no change. Aung San Suu Kyi was freed from house arrest on 6 May 2002, but she was re-arrested on 31 May 2003 (see page 3).

Since the 1990s, while the West has exerted pressure and imposed sanctions on the junta to demand the reinstate-

ment of democracy, the leaders of China and the ASEAN (2) countries have chosen a policy of 'constructive engagement' with the military regime, allowing their businessmen to land lucrative contracts. In particular, China sells several million dollars worth of arms each year to Burma in addition to another billion dollars worth of consumer goods (as long as this economic relationship is maintained, the regime's leaders may feel they have little to fear from calls originating in Europe and US for economic sanctions). Relations with some neighbours have, at times, become strained. This was the case with Thailand when the Burmese army crossed the Thai border to attack Burmese refugee camps situated a few kilometres away, and with Malaysia and

Indonesia following continual Burmese repression of Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine State. However, these disagreements are always resolved: economic interests necessitate it. ●

(1) There are currently only three ethnic armies still opposing the Tatmadaw (the name given to the Burmese army): the Karen National Union, the Karen National Progressive Party and the Shan State Army-South. These three groups no longer control the swathes of territory they did in the past but rather tend to carry out guerrilla activities against SPDC soldiers who are afraid to venture beyond the major roads in many ethnic areas.

(2) ASEAN is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It has 10 members: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (official name of Burma, see box), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

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Burma or Myanmar?

Following the demonstrations in 1988, one of the modifications made by the dictatorship was that of changing the country's name and the names of several towns. Its argument was that a clearer break was needed with the colonial past by choosing names which were closer to modern Burmese, but the democratic opposition does not agree with these alterations. "Burma" has become "Myanmar", a term which no longer identifies the nation with a given ethnic group. The capital "Rangoon" has become "Yangon", the town of "Moulmein" is now "Mawlamyine", "Pegu" is now "Bago" and so forth.