

BURMA BULLETIN

XXXXXXXX A month-in-review of events in Burma XXXXXXXX

ALTERNATIVE A S E A N N E T W O R K O N B U R M A
campaigns, advocacy & capacity-building for human rights & democracy

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- **ASEAN's scandalous response literally puts asylum-seekers and migrants from Burma between the devil and the deep blue sea: deportation into the hands of the brutal regime, sold into the clutches of human traffickers or left out to die in open ocean.**
- **Fleeing persecution in Burma and squalid living conditions in Bangladesh, nearly 1,000 Rohingya refugees set to sea in hopes of reaching Malaysia. An estimated 538 boat people die at sea.**
- **The regime arrests 16 dissidents, including 12 NLD members, and sentences eight to prison terms up to 104 years.**
- **Detention conditions continue to deteriorate. Four political prisoners die in Burma's jails. In early January, the SPDC also suspends political prisoners' visitation rights for one month.**
- **The regime steps up religious persecution. SPDC authorities in Rangoon's Kyauktada Township ban Christian and Muslim prayer meetings in residential apartments.**
- **SPDC Army deserters on the rise because of increasing abuse at the hands of their superiors.**
- **UNICEF reports that approximately 10% of all Burma's children die before reaching the age of five - the 2nd highest child mortality rate in Asia.**
- **FAO and WFP say that five million Burmese in need of continued food assistance.**
- **UN General Assembly adopts yet another resolution that strongly condemns the SPDC's human rights record. No ASEAN country supports the resolution.**

*This issue also covers the events in December 2008 not previously reported

KEY STORY

Rohingya boat people, trafficked Burmese: a human security priority or ASEAN's latest shame?

Allegations that Thai authorities intentionally left hundreds of helpless Rohingya boat people to die in open seas caused an international scandal. The accusations arose just days after news broke that the US Senate was investigating claims that Malaysian officials were acting in collusion with human traffickers to extort or traffick Burmese migrants and asylum-seekers.¹ In Indonesia, government authorities

¹ AFP (14 Jan 09) US probes Malaysian officials' link to human trafficking

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decided to repatriate the Rohingya who made landfall on a small island opposite Aceh because they were “economic migrants.”² If the fate of the Rohingya were not perilous enough, the SPDC added insult to persecution when the junta denied that the Rohingya were an ethnic group from Burma.³ The net result is that ASEAN has collectively placed the Rohingya in an immigration purgatory. In reality, the Rohingya boat people are the tip of the iceberg that represents the SPDC’s history of economic and armed aggression against its own people. This constant barrage of violence has already caused millions to flee Burma in the past decade - with two million having fled to Thailand alone. [For more information, please see the briefer “*Rohingya, asylum seekers & migrants from Burma: A human security priority for ASEAN*”, available at <http://www.altsean.org/Reports/RohingyaMigrants.php>]

Those escaping the SPDC’s policy of religious persecution should be a concern for all ASEAN members. The plight of the Rohingya affects the comprehensive security of the entire ASEAN region. As such, ASEAN must be proactive in pressuring the SPDC to address the root causes that force Rohingya to flee persecution in Burma. ASEAN members must ensure that Rohingya are treated humanely and cooperate with UN agencies to this end. ASEAN cannot continue on a path that will only make the situation worse for the Rohingya.

ASEAN’s latest boat people

Fleeing persecution in Burma and squalid living conditions in Bangladesh, nearly 1,000 Rohingya refugees set sail on the open ocean in hopes of reaching Malaysia during December 2008 and January 2009. An estimated 538 boat people died at sea.⁴

- **15 December:** Ninety-seven Rohingya and Bangladeshi boat people left for Malaysia from Bahar Sara in Cox's Bazaar district. Their boat returned to Bangladesh on 4 January 2009 after being stopped several times by the SPDC Navy.⁵
- **29 December:** Indian authorities said that about 300 of 412 boat people from Bangladesh and Burma were presumed dead in the Bay of Bengal. The boat people had left for Malaysia from Bangladesh on six small boats.⁶
- **2 January:** Thai Navy in Phangnga intercepted a boat carrying 60 Rohingya.⁷
- **4 January:** A boat carrying 60 people, including Rohingya and Bengalis, left for Malaysia from Sonar Para in Cox’s Bazaar district.⁸
- **7 January:** Fishermen found a boat carrying 193 boat people, mostly Rohingya, off Sabang Island in Indonesia’s Aceh province. The boat had been towed back to sea by Thai authorities before reaching Sabang.⁹
- **12 January:** Forty Rohingya and Bangladeshi boat people left for Malaysia from Cox's Bazaar.¹⁰
- **16 January:** Thai authorities intercepted a boat carrying 46 Rohingya in Southern Thailand.¹¹
- **17 January:** Indian authorities rescued 152 boat people on the Andaman and Nicobar islands.¹²
- **27 January:** Thai Navy detained 78 Rohingya on a boat people found drifting near the Surin Islands in Phangnga.¹³

The arrival of Rohingya boat people has placed a burden on receiving countries. The number of Rohingya refugees apprehended by Thai authorities has risen four-fold over the last three years, reaching 4,886 in 2008.¹⁴ Faced with this challenge, the Thai government has adopted a brutal response. Numerous accounts corroborated charges that Thai authorities, on at least two occasions, failed to

² AP (22 Jan 09) Indonesia to repatriate 193 boat migrants

³ BBC (30 Jan 09) Burma rejects boat-people claims

⁴ Straits Times (18 Jan 09) Boat people feared dead

⁵ Kaladan News (05 Jan 09) Rohingyas leave for Malaysia by boat in search of greener pastures

⁶ Reuters (29 Dec 08) India widens sea search for 300 missing migrants

⁷ Kaladan News (05 Jan 09) Rohingyas leave for Malaysia by boat in search of greener pastures

⁸ Kaladan News (05 Jan 09) Rohingyas leave for Malaysia by boat in search of greener pastures

⁹ AFP (07 Jan 09) Foreigners stranded near Indonesia; Jakarta Post (10 Jan 09) Myanmar boat people take up refuge in Sabang; BBC (15 Jan 09) Thais 'leave boat people to die'

¹⁰ Kaladan News (13 Jan 09) Another engine boat with boat-people leaves for Malaysia

¹¹ BBC News (16 Jan 09) Thais hold more migrants amid row

¹² AFP (18 Jan 09) Indian Coast Guard rescues migrants, Thailand accused

¹³ Bangkok Post (28 Jan 09) More boat people caught off Phangnga

¹⁴ Reuters (20 Jan 09) UN seeks access to Myanmar refugees held in Thailand

protect these persons and knowingly put them at further risk.¹⁵ Survivors from both incidents told of similar experiences - capture by Thai authorities, ill-treatment, and eventual forcing out to sea on disabled boats with little food or water.¹⁶

INSIDE BURMA

Ethnic groups boycott 2010 elections

In January, the Kachin Independence Organization and the Kachin National Organization stated they would boycott the 2010 elections because they believed that the process would be neither free and fair nor usher in genuine democracy.¹⁷ Similarly, the New Mon State Party and the Mon National Democratic Front announced they would not contend in the elections due to the provisions contained in SPDC-drafted constitution.¹⁸

Meanwhile, the regime kicked off its campaign for the elections. In Chin State, the pro-junta National Unity Party (NUP) began recruiting new members.¹⁹ In an attempt to curry favor with voters in the rural areas, the USDA began offering loans to farmers in Rangoon Division's Thonegwa Township.²⁰ Similarly, NUP members in Mon State's Mudon Township planted summer paddy for local farmers.²¹ Pro-junta supporter Aye Lwin announced that his two political parties - the National Political League (Union of Myanmar) and the 88 generation students (Union of Myanmar) - would be contesting the polls.²²

SPDC for Obama?

On 21 January, a day after Barack Obama was sworn in as new US President, an SPDC official expressed hopes that Washington would change its policy towards the junta and end "misunderstandings" of the past.²³ On 22 January, SPDC Chairman Sr Gen Than Shwe congratulated Obama on his inauguration.²⁴ However, the SPDC Censorship Board suppressed parts of Obama's inauguration speech which was published by the Voice weekly journal. The censored passage stated, "[...] Those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history."²⁵

SPDC Army in disarray

According to leaked minutes from a meeting of senior SPDC military officials, the Commander of the Northern Military Command Maj Gen Soe Win reported that the number of desertions among SPDC Army soldiers was increasing. Soe Win also said that undisciplined and corrupt army officers were increasingly abusing their subordinates.²⁶ In January, it was reported that over the past year in Northern Arakan State alone, five SPDC Army soldiers committed suicide because their superiors had refused to discharge them.²⁷

¹⁵ Straits Times (18 Jan 09) Boat people feared dead

¹⁶ Jakarta Post (10 Jan 09) Myanmar boat people take up refuge in Sabang ; BBC News (15 Jan 09) Thais 'leave boat people to die; AFP (18 Jan 09) Thai govt sending Burmese minority asylum seekers to sea

¹⁷ Mizzima News (09 Jan 09) Ethnic Kachin rebel vow to oppose junta held elections; Mizzima News (13 Jan 09) Kachin party - but not KIO - to contest 2010 election; DVB (21 Jan 09) KIO and NMSP rule out election participation

¹⁸ IMNA (19 Jan 09) Largest Mon political party will not participate in 2010 elections; IMNA (26 Jan 09) Victorious Mon party from 1990 election supports NMSP refusal to compete in 2010

¹⁹ Mizzima News (13 Jan 09) Pro-junta party kicks off campaign for 2010 polls in northwestern Burma

²⁰ DVB (06 Jan 09) USDA grants loans to farmers; DVB (15 Jan 09) Farmers encouraged to join USDA to get loans

²¹ IMNA (13 Jan 09) NUP planting summer paddy in bid for support in 2010 election

²² Mizzima News (06 Jan 09) Pro-junta group announces formation of political parties

²³ AFP (22 Jan 09) Myanmar hopes for policy change from Obama: official

²⁴ NLM (23 Jan 09) Senior General Than Shwe congratulates President of USA

²⁵ Irrawaddy (26 Jan 09) Obama speech censored in Burma

²⁶ Mizzima News (29 Jan 09) Armed forces becoming more corrupt and inefficient: Regional Commander

²⁷ Narinjara News (22 Jan 09) Five soldiers commit suicide in Arakan in 2008

Soldiers rape women

- **27 December:** The body of a seven-year-old girl was found with gunshot wounds and signs of rape in Ma Oo Bin village, Kyaukkyi Township, Pegu Division. SPDC Army soldiers from LIB 350 were suspected of the assault.²⁸
- **28 December:** Two SPDC Army soldiers raped a 21-year-old woman from Hsa Hmaw Township, Kachin State.²⁹
- **20 January:** Three SPDC Army soldiers raped a 16-year-old girl in Rangoon.³⁰

Trucks from China

In mid-January, it was reported that five military trucks from China crossed into Burma through the Jiegao border gate in Northern Shan State. The trucks were reportedly transported to the SPDC's military base in Meikhtila.³¹

Asia's 2nd worst child mortality

On 15 January, UNICEF launched its annual report, "The State of the World's Children". The report rated Burma as having the 2nd highest child mortality rate in Asia, with approximately 10% of all children not surviving past 5 years old.³²

On 22 December, Médecins Sans Frontières, in its annual report on the "Top Ten humanitarian crises," said the health care system in Burma is perilously underfunded and leaves the vast majority of people without access to healthcare. The lack of funds has caused needless suffering and preventable deaths.³³

HIV/AIDS patients forcibly evicted

On 19 January, SPDC authorities forced 35 HIV/AIDS patients out of the Aithawka Rama Shwehintha Yele monastery in Rangoon's North Okkalapa Township. The patients had been receiving free treatment at the monastery for the past several years. Twenty-four of the 35 patients were forcibly transferred to Waibargi Hospital. On 29 January, it was reported that patients at the hospital had been discharged and that SPDC authorities were pressuring them to return to their hometowns despite the need for continued medical treatment.³⁴

UN: Five million in need of food

On 28 January, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Program (WFP) released a report that stated five million people in Burma are in need of food assistance because of cyclone Nargis and a continued rat infestation that has destroyed crops in Chin State.³⁵ The WFP said it could not get enough food aid to Western Arakan State and Chin State because of SPDC-imposed travel restrictions.³⁶

Cyclone Nargis survivors still struggling

After six months of providing aid and humanitarian assistance to cyclone Nargis survivors, on 19 December, the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) published its first periodic review subsequent to the July

²⁸ KWO (05 Jan 09) KWO demands accountability for SPDC rape and killing of 7-year-old girl

²⁹ Mizzima (09 Jan 08) Two soldiers accused of rape and murder attempt

³⁰ DVB (30 Jan 09) Three soldiers accused of rape at pagoda festival

³¹ Mizzima News (14 Jan 09) China provides more military trucks to Burma

³² UNICEF (15 Jan 09) The State of the World's Children 2009

³³ Mizzima News (22 Dec 08) Burma's health care crippling under funded: MSF

³⁴ Irrawaddy (22 Jan 09) AIDS Patients Forced to Leave Monastery; Mizzima News (29 Jan 09) HIV/AIDS patients driven out from Rangoon

³⁵ AP (28 Jan 09) UN: Burma Faces Food Crisis; Mizzima News (30 Jan 09) Over five million people face food shortage in Burma

³⁶ BBC News (28 Jan 09) 'Six million Burmese need food'

2008 Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) report. The report has updated the situation in Nargis impacted communities. Key findings included:³⁷

- Only one third of households reported that adequate medical supplies were available at local clinics.
- Food insecurity persisted in the Southwest portion of the Irrawaddy delta and locations around Rangoon.
- A large number of households were still living in inadequate and overcrowded shelters which provided little protection from heat and rain.
- International assistance was not reaching the Western areas of the delta and some of the larger towns.

Drug smuggling/trafficking

During December and January, there were numerous reports of individuals and SPDC officials arrested for drug smuggling:

- **19 December:** Police arrested a drug trafficker in Maungdaw, Arakan State, and seized 1400 amphetamine tablets and 900,000 kyat in cash.³⁸
- **Late December:** SPDC authorities arrested a Rangoon Division SPDC Army warrant officer from Light Infantry Battalion 701 on charges of drug trafficking. The officer was reportedly trafficking drugs because he couldn't support his family on his army salary.³⁹
- **31 December:** Special Branch police arrested a woman drug trafficker in Akyab, Arakan State, and seized 20,000 amphetamine tablets.⁴⁰
- **25 January:** Police seized at least 28 kilos of heroin found on a Singaporean-flagged ship docked at Rangoon's port.⁴¹
- **25 January:** Police in Buthidaung, Arakan State, arrested a fellow police officer and a woman on charges of drug trafficking and seized 150 grams of marijuana, 2,000 marijuana-filled cheroots, and 430 amphetamine tablets.⁴²
- **26 January:** SPDC authorities arrested a man from Bogale Township, Irrawaddy Division, on charges of drug smuggling and confiscated 32 kilos of heroin found inside container boxes on a boat headed to Rangoon.⁴³
- **30 January:** SPDC authorities seized an unspecified amount of heroin in an upscale residential area in Rangoon's Hlaing Tharyar Township.⁴⁴

HUMAN RIGHTS

On 12 January, Freedom House ranked Burma among the "worst of the worst" countries in its annual worldwide survey on freedom.⁴⁵ Between 22 December and 23 January, the regime arrested 16 dissidents, including 12 NLD members, and sentenced eight to prison terms up to 104 years.

Detention conditions continued to deteriorate. Between 19 December and 22 January, four political prisoners died in Burma's jails. In early January, the SPDC suspended political prisoners' visitation rights for one month.⁴⁶

The regime also stepped up religious persecution. On 5 January, SPDC authorities in Rangoon's Kyauktada Township banned Christian and Muslim prayer meetings in private residences.⁴⁷

³⁷ TCG (19 Dec 08) Post Nargis Periodic Review I

³⁸ Narinjara News (22 Dec 08) Drug trafficker arrested, Yaba seized in Maungdaw

³⁹ Irrawaddy (07 Jan 09) Soldier's arrest for transporting drugs a sign of the times

⁴⁰ Narinjara News (06 Jan 09) Woman Yaba trafficker arrested in Sittwe with 20000 yaba tablets

⁴¹ Irrawaddy (30 Jan 09) Raids in Rangoon Yield More Heroin

⁴² Kaladan News (26 Jan 09) Drug distributor arrested in Buthidaung

⁴³ DVB (27 Jan 09) Crab exporter arrested for heroin trafficking

⁴⁴ Irrawaddy (30 Jan 09) Raids in Rangoon Yield More Heroin

⁴⁵ Bloomberg (13 Jan 09) Global Freedom Fell in 2008 Amid Crackdowns, Rights Group Says

⁴⁶ Mizzima News (10 Jan 09) Visitation rights denied to families of political prisoners

⁴⁷ Mizzima News (09 Jan 09) Muslims proscribed from worshipping in residential flats

Custodial deaths

- **19 December:** NLD youth member Maung San, 35, committed suicide in Pegu prison.⁴⁸
- **28 December:** Political prisoner Htay Lwin Oo, 46, died of tuberculosis in Mandalay's Ohbo prison.⁴⁹
- **22 January:** Monk U Arnanda, 61, from Thitsar Tharaphu monastery in Rangoon's North Okkalapa Township's died in Insein prison.⁵⁰

Detention conditions

- On 24 December, SPDC authorities in Pegu prison severely beat NLD member Aung Kyaw Oo.⁵¹
- On 13 January, monk leader U Gambira began a hunger strike in Mandalay's Ohbo prison.⁵² On 17 January, the SPDC transferred him to Khamti prison in Sagaing Division.⁵³
- Relief activist Yin Yin Wine, 36, suffers from gastro-intestinal disorder in Rangoon's Insein prison. She has not received proper medical treatment and authorities rejected her request to be treated outside the prison.⁵⁴
- SPDC authorities in Buthidaung prison, Arakan State, put 88 Generation Student Htay Kywe in solitary confinement.⁵⁵
- Student activist Kyaw Zaw, 19, was transferred from Insein prison to Shwe Tathay labor camp in Twante Township, Rangoon Division.⁵⁶
- Political prisoner Zaw Naing Htwe was transferred to Lay Mine labor camp in Taungoo Township, Pegu Division, where he is being held in shackles and deprived of adequate food and water.⁵⁷
- Activist Kathy Aung, 23, suffered a miscarriage in Mandalay's Ohbo prison.⁵⁸
- 88 Generation Student Nilar Thein, suffers from a peptic ulcer in Thayet prison, Magwe Division.⁵⁹
- All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) member Kyaw Ko Ko was hospitalized in Insein prison after suffering from jaundice.⁶⁰

Arrests

- **22 December:** SPDC Military Intelligence in Maungdaw, Arakan State, arrested a 45-year-old businessman for alleged connections with a Burmese media organization in exile.⁶¹
- **30 December:** SPDC authorities in Rangoon arrested nine NLD youth members for calling for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.⁶² Six of them were released on 14 January.⁶³
- **4 January:** Special Branch police in Twante, Rangoon Division, arrested private tutor Aung Pe, 52, for saluting General Aung San's monument.⁶⁴
- **6 January:** SPDC authorities in Muse Township, Northern Shan State, arrested a 44-year-old local villager for possession of a Burmese pro-democracy media group's monthly newsletter.⁶⁵
- **12 January:** Special Branch police in Dala Township, Rangoon Division, arrested NLD youth members Htet Soe Linn and Thet Paing Linn.⁶⁶

⁴⁸ DVB (25 Dec 08) Political prisoner commits suicide in Bago jail; Irrawaddy (29 Dec 08) Political Prisoner Htay Lwin Oo Dies

⁴⁹ Irrawaddy (29 Dec 08) Political Prisoner Htay Lwin Oo Dies

⁵⁰ DVB (30 Jan 09) Monk U Arnanda dies in detention

⁵¹ DVB (08 Jan 09) Commodity protestor beaten in Bago prison

⁵² DVB (19 Jan 09) U Gambira reportedly on hunger strike; AFP (23 Jan 09) Jailed Myanmar monk goes on hunger strike

⁵³ Mizzima News (22 Jan 09) Gambira transferred to Hkamti prison: Prison official; DVB (22 Jan 09) U Gambira transferred to Khandee prison; Irrawaddy (21 Jan 09) Imprisoned Monk Leader Transferred

⁵⁴ Irrawaddy (22 Dec 08) Health of Burmese Cyclone Volunteer at Risk

⁵⁵ DVB (24 Dec 08) 88 Generation Students' member tortured by prison authority

⁵⁶ Irrawaddy (09 Jan 09) Teenage activist transferred to labor camp

⁵⁷ Irrawaddy (09 Jan 09) Teenage activist transferred to labor camp; Irrawaddy (16 Jan 09) Freezing temperatures hit remote areas of Burma

⁵⁸ Mizzima News (22 Jan 09) Detained female activist suffers miscarriage in prison; DVB (22 Jan 09) Political prisoner miscarries in detention

⁵⁹ Mizzima News (20 Jan 09) Nilar Thein's health deteriorates

⁶⁰ Mizzima News (08 Jan 09) Detained student leader hospitalized in Insein prison

⁶¹ Narinjara News (29 Dec 08) Man arrested for connections with media in exile

⁶² AP (30 Dec 08) Activists calling for release of Suu Kyi arrested

⁶³ Mizzima News (15 Jan 09) Six opposition party members freed

⁶⁴ Mizzima News (05 Jan 09) Private tutor stages solo protest

⁶⁵ SHAN (16 Jan 09) Villager arrested for carrying 'Independence' copy

⁶⁶ DVB (13 Jan 09) Two NLD youth members arrested

- **14 January:** SPDC authorities arrested Dala Township NLD member Min Thike Htoo.⁶⁷
- **16 January:** Police in Allen Township, Magwe Division, arrested lawyer Poe Phyu, 30.⁶⁸

Prison sentences

- **3 January:** SPDC court sentenced ABFSU member Bo Min Yu Ko to 104 years in prison in connection with the September 2007 anti-junta protests.⁶⁹
- **5 January:** A court in Rangoon's South Dagon Township sentenced NLD-LA member Khin Maung Win, 29, to 10 years in prison with hard labor for carrying out relief activities for cyclone Nargis survivors.⁷⁰
- **19 January:** SPDC sentenced NLD member Thein Soe to two years in prison for monitoring corruption and recruitment of child soldiers by SPDC authorities in Rangoon's South Dagon Township.⁷¹
- **21 January:** A court in Dala Township, Rangoon Division, sentenced NLD youth members Htet Soe Linn and Thet Paing Linn to two and a half years in prison on charges of disturbing a government official on duty.⁷²
- **21 January:** It was reported that Rangoon's Mayangone Township court sentenced monk U Khaema Sara to 14 years in prison for the alleged theft of a jade Buddha statue and possession of a forged identity card.⁷³
- **21 January:** A court in Rangoon's Hlegu Township sentenced Khin Thein, the mother of a local NLD member, to one month in prison.⁷⁴
- **23 January:** Magwe court sentenced labor activist Zaw Htay to 10 years in prison for reporting to the ILO land confiscation by the SPDC Army.⁷⁵

Forced labor

Forced labor incidents involving construction of roads, schools, a military base, and city beautification were reported:

- Beginning on 1 January, SPDC authorities ordered 100 households along the main road through Khawzar Sub-Township, Ye Township, Mon State, to supply gravel and stones for road repairs.⁷⁶
- On 2 January, SPDC authorities ordered Yin-Ye villagers in Ye Township, Mon State, to provide 30 large piles of firewood for a brick factory operated by IB 31.⁷⁷
- On 2 January, it was reported that the SPDC Army was forcing villagers in Mohyin Township, Northern Kachin State, to assist in the construction of an artillery base and radar station.⁷⁸
- On 5 January, it was reported that SPDC authorities in Natsinchaung village in Zeegone Township, Pegu Division, had forced local residents to do reconstruction work on a school destroyed by cyclone Nargis.⁷⁹
- In advance of a visit by SPDC PM Lt Gen Thein Sein on 26 January, SPDC authorities in Maungdaw, Arakan State, forced residents to beautify the town.⁸⁰

⁶⁷ DVB (20 Jan 09) Third Dala township NLD member arrested

⁶⁸ DVB (19 Jan 09) Lawyer Pho Phyu arrested

⁶⁹ AP (14 Jan 09) Myanmar activist gets 104 years in jail

⁷⁰ Mizzima News (06 Jan 09) Nargis volunteer sentenced to 10 years imprisonment

⁷¹ Mizzima News (21 Jan 09) NLD member jailed for two years for disturbing officials

⁷² DVB (23 Jan 09) Dala NLD youth member jailed

⁷³ DVB (21 Jan 09) Monk given 14-year jail term

⁷⁴ DVB (27 Jan 09) NLD member's relatives jailed after being assaulted

⁷⁵ DVB (26 Jan 09) Labour activist jailed for 10 years

⁷⁶ DVB (02 Jan 08) Mohyin residents forced into construction work

⁷⁷ IMNA (09 Jan 09) Villagers forced to supply free timber and firewood to Burmese army in Ye Township

⁷⁸ IMNA (15 Jan 09) Households in Ye Township forced to supply truckloads of construction materials

⁷⁹ DVB (05 Jan 09) Villagers forced to work on school reconstruction

⁸⁰ Narinjara News (26 Jan 09) Residents Forced to Clean Town for PM's Trip

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ASEAN doesn't support UNGA resolution

On 24 December, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that strongly condemned widespread human rights violations in Burma and called on the SPDC to halt politically motivated arrests and free all detainees and political prisoners, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The resolution was approved by a vote of 80-25 with 45 abstentions. It was the 18th resolution passed by the UNGA against the military regime since 1992. As with the draft resolution considered in the UN's Third Committee in November, no ASEAN country supported the resolution. ASEAN countries voting against the resolution included: Brunei, Laos, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines abstained. Cambodia was absent.⁸¹

Abhisit indicates "flexible" approach for the junta

On 14 January, new Thai PM Abhisit Vejjajiva noted a change in foreign policy towards the SPDC. Abhisit said that Thailand will use a "flexible engagement" approach to the junta. The exact nature of such a policy remains undefined. Abhisit also said that sanctions on the SPDC were counter-productive.⁸² This flexibility seemed to manifest itself in Abhisit's response to reports that Thai officials had forcibly abandoned Rohingya boat people to die in open seas. Although Abhisit declared his intention to crack down against migrants, he also promised an investigation into the allegations and vowed to punish those guilty of human rights abuses. Abhisit also expressed willingness to cooperate with the UN.⁸³ Meanwhile, Thai FM Kasit Piromya initiated discussions with the ambassadors of Burma, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, and India and said that he was preparing to raise the Rohingya issue for discussion at the upcoming ASEAN summit in Thailand on 27 February.⁸⁴

ECONOMY

Sanctions update

During his last days in office, former US President George W. Bush ordered the tightening of economic sanctions on Burma. Junta cronies Zaw Zaw and Win Aung, along with 14 companies, were added to Treasury Department's sanction list.⁸⁵

The squeeze is on

With the drop in global commodity prices, SPDC revenues from natural resources are down. The SPDC's income from gas exports, which account for about 40% of all export income, fell 28.5% in value between April and December 2008 - a loss of US\$670 million.⁸⁶ Burma's trade surplus decreased more than 39%, from US\$2.83 billion in 2007 to US\$1.72 billion during the same period.⁸⁷

Despite a 72% drop in global oil prices,⁸⁸ the junta refused to adjust the rates for gas at state-owned gas stations. This has led to an unusual situation where gas is now cheaper on the black market - 300 kyat (US\$0.27) lower than the 2,500 kyat (US\$2.20) per gallon charged at state-run pumps.⁸⁹

Cyclone Nargis delivered a near fatal blow to the rice plains of the Irrawaddy delta, with yields down 30% in some areas in 2008. In another blow to Burmese farmers, the price of paddy in Burma dropped

⁸¹ IHT (24 Dec 08) UN condemns human rights violations in Myanmar

⁸² Irrawaddy (15 Jan 09) Burma Situation Affects Region: Thai PM

⁸³ AFP (22 Jan 09) PM vows migrant crackdown, AFP (20 Jan 09) PM: Rohingya reports 'exaggerated', VOA (19 Jan 09) Thailand to Investigate Rohingya Refugee Abuse Claims

⁸⁴ Nation (26 Jan 09) Rohingya refugee issue needs a holistic approach, Xinhua (30 Jan 09) UNHCR allowed to meet Rohingyas

⁸⁵ AFP (16 Jan 09) US slaps more sanctions on Myanmar regime backers;

⁸⁶ Irrawaddy (08 Jan 09) Global Crisis Hits Junta's Pockets as Gas Prices Fall

⁸⁷ AP (06 Jan 09) Myanmar trade surplus shrinks as gas exports fall

⁸⁸ Bloomberg (30 Jan 09) Oil Gains on Report That U.S. Economy Shrank Less Than Forecast

⁸⁹ Irrawaddy (09 Jan 09) Falling Fuel Prices Have No Effect on Gov't Pumps

from 575,000 kyat (US\$500) per ton in July 2008 to a current level of 287,500 kyat (US\$250).⁹⁰ Thus many rice farmers are working at a loss, with income from the sale of an acre of rice amounting to 70,000 kyat (US\$59) with production costs at about 90,000 kyat (US\$78).⁹¹

OTHER BURMA NEWS IN DECEMBER AND JANUARY

Dec 21	NLD member Win Tin visits the families of political prisoners in Rangoon.
Dec 23	CRPP calls for unity in Burma during a meeting held at the NLD headquarters in Rangoon.
Dec 30	SPDC authorities hold opening ceremony for the Kengtung Hydroelectric dam in Kengtung Township, Shan State.
Dec 31	Two miners die and seven hurt in a jade mine explosion in Hpakant, Kachin State.
Dec 31	Newly elected Bangladeshi PM Sheikh Hasina demands the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.
1	Personal physician Dr Tin Myo Win visits Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.
1	NLD releases a statement that calls for national reconciliation and the immediate release of all political prisoners. CRPP and seven pro-democracy parties express support for the statement.
1	United Wa State Army announces that its territory in Eastern Burma will now be known as the Wa state government special administrative region.
1	US human rights advocate Eric Stover is denied entry into Burma.
2	US highlights its support for efforts to establish democracy in Burma ahead of the country's 61st anniversary of independence.
3	Weekly journal Voice reports that the SPDC Information Ministry has revoked the license of 11 journals and 20 magazines.
4	About 250 NLD members attend an Independence Day ceremony at the party headquarters in Rangoon. The NLD calls for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.
4	Daw Aung San Suu Kyi puts up a banner inside her residence compound which says: "Act decisively in the interest of the nation and the people."
4	In his Independence Day anniversary speech, SPDC Chairman Sr Gen Than Shwe attacks "neo-colonialists" interfering in Burma's internal affairs and "driving a wedge among national people and inciting riots to undermine national unity, peace and stability of a nation."
4	For the second time in three years, SPDC Chairman Sr Gen Than Shwe fails to attend the state dinner marking the Independence Day anniversary.
5	About 70 students from Akyab university, Arakan State, protest the local bus companies' suspension of service to the university.
5	Chairman of the Arakan League for Democracy Saw Mra Aung, 92, dies.
6	SPDC authorities release popular hip hop singer Yan Yan Chan.
7	Malaysian police and immigration authorities arrest 300 Burmese migrant workers in a raid at Pasar Budaya market in Kuala Lumpur.
8	One thousand Burmese jade merchants hold a four-day jade exhibition in China's Yunnan province.
8	About 200 workers of an oil company in Myaing Township, Magwe Division, protest the takeover of oilfields in Vaheen village by another company. SPDC security forces arrest four protesters.
12	All Kachin Students' Union members distribute anti-junta leaflets in four Townships in Kachin State.
12	Thai officials arrest over 170 Burmese migrant workers during a raid on a shrimp factory in Mahachai, Samut Sakorn Province, Thailand.
12	Bangladesh authorities in Chittagong halt rice imports from Burma after finding a shipment of rotten rice.
12	SPDC authorities deny lawyers access to a court in Insein prison to defend their clients, MP Nyi Pu and Dr Tin Min Htut.
12	UK Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell says that the SPDC-organized elections in 2010 are designed to entrench military rule.
14	State-run newspaper New Light of Myanmar reports that during December 2008, SPDC police arrested 277 drug traffickers and seized more than 50 kilos of opium, 2.32 kilos of heroin, 120,000 amphetamine tablets, and other precursor chemicals.
15	Combined DKBA and SPDC Army forces clash with KNLA soldiers in Kawkareik Township, Karen

⁹⁰ Irrawaddy (13 Jan 09) Burmese rice farmers struggle to make a living

⁹¹ Irrawaddy (26 Jan 09) Soaring kyat means more economic turmoil for Burmese

	State.
17	SPDC authorities in Myingyan Township, Mandalay Division, order the relocation of 78 shop owners in preparation for the building of a new police station.
18	US-based “Realizing the Dream” organization awards Daw Aung San Suu Kyi the “Trumpet of Conscience” award.
18	Australia authorities rescue two Burmese nationals floating in a bathtub-sized cooler from the waters off Northern Australia.
19	Weekly Eleven reports that the SPDC Livestock Breeding and Veterinary Department has banned the breeding of chicken, quail, and pig in populated areas in Rangoon as part of its preventive measures against bird flu.
19	Chinese media reports that more than 50 Chinese in Shanxi Province have been abducted to Burma and held for ransom.
20	European Commission donates 40.5 million Euros for humanitarian aid in Burma.
21	About 300 Burmese refugees demonstrate outside the UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur to protest discrimination against Rohingya.
21	Chinese police officials say that of the 19 known teenagers kidnapped and taken to Burma for ransom, 17 have returned home. Chinese police arrest two suspects in connection with the kidnappings.
21	Danish Development Minister Ulla Toraes and Norwegian Minister for Environment and Development Erik Solheim visit Burma and meet with SPDC officials.
22	On appeal, the Eastern Rangoon Provincial Court reduces Chin activist Kyaw Soe’s prison term from 33 years to 13.
23	NCGUB re-elects Dr. Sein Win as PM.
26	About 100 people protest at the Thai and Burmese embassies in London to demand just treatment of Rohingya boat people.
28	NLD Central Executive Committee members request a meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.
28	A Thai court in Ranong Province sentences 66 Rohingya boat people to five days in jail for illegally entering Thailand.
31	UN Special Advisor on Burma Ibrahim Gambari arrives in Burma to start a four-day visit.

REPORTS ON BURMA RELEASED IN JANUARY

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