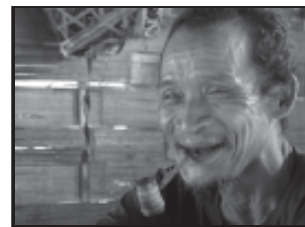


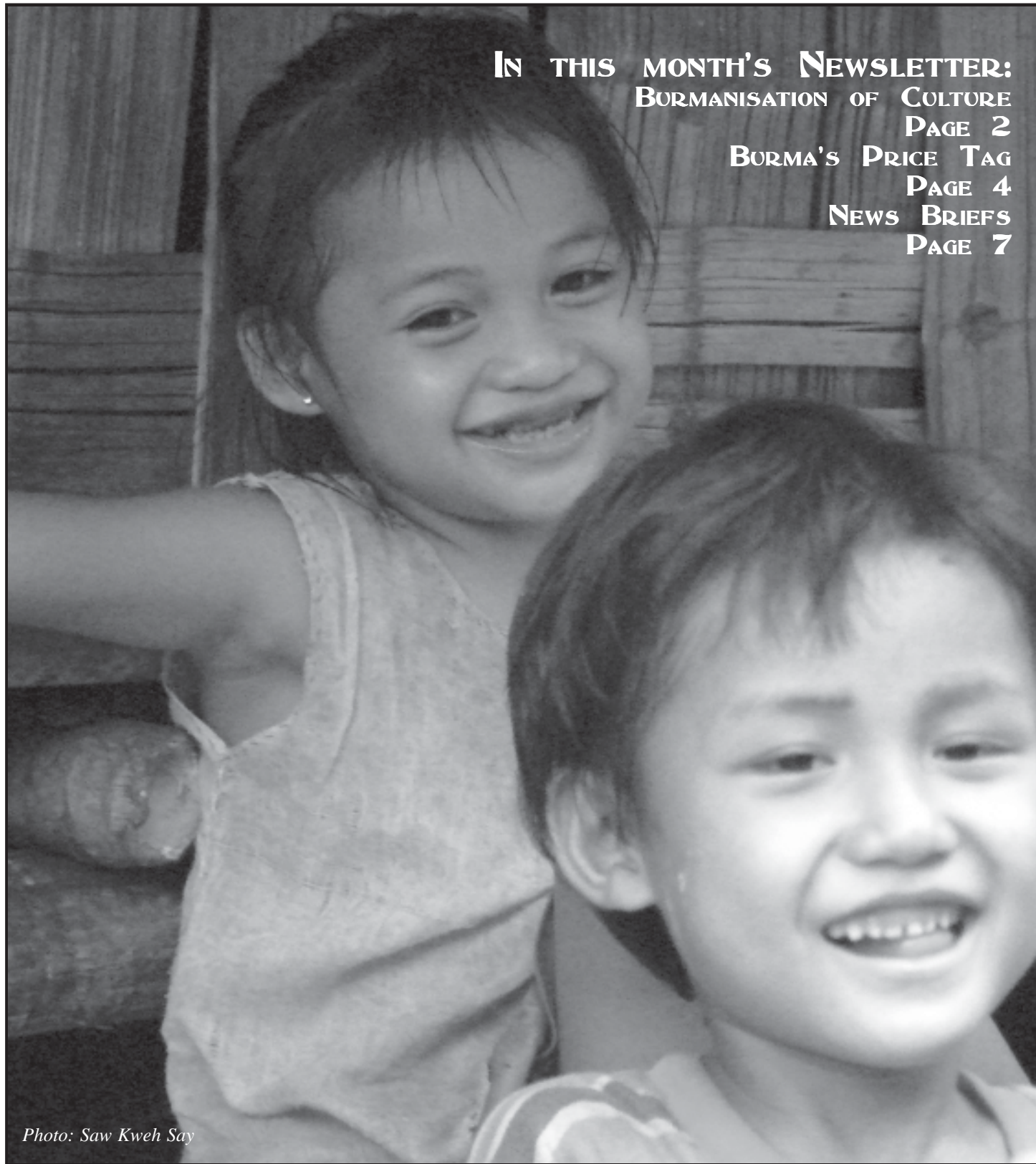
# Burma Issues

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*Photo: Saw Kweh Say*

# BURMANISATION OF CULTURE:

## INTERFERENCE AND DENIAL OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION UNDER MILITARY RULE

BY NAW CHA MU



Burma is a country where many different ethnic nationalities live. All major ethnic groups have their own language and traditional culture, however their political and cultural rights are denied by the ruling Burmese junta. People can only celebrate cultural holidays when they are pre-approved by the junta and this does not occur often. The reality of the situation is that most ethnic cultures are being eliminated by junta and their actions.

One example of this is the attempt to eliminate ethnic languages. No ethnic languages are allowed to be taught in the school because the successive Burmese have attempted to assimilate the ethnic people to become Burman forcing the ethnic people only to learn Burmese at school. Consequently, young generations of ethnic people are growing up without knowing their own language. Regretfully, nowadays younger generation prefer to speak Burmese instead of ethnic languages because they are ashamed to speak their own language, especially in public area. They are also afraid of the criticism of speaking an ethnic language in public areas. Even within their own homes they refuse speak their mother language anymore.

In the cities some people say that they are ethnic nationalities but they can't speak any

ethnic languages. Others can speak their own language but can't read and write it at all. By losing the ability to communication in ones mother tongue, it also affects ones cultural identification. One can ask: can you consider yourselves as an ethnic people? Let's say that you are Karen (one of the ethnic groups from Burma) but you can't read, speak or write your own language. This means you already lost part of your identification as Karen. As a result we can clearly see that the ethnic people

in Burma gradually losing their value and identification as an ethnic person.

**“MANY INDIVIDUALS SUPPRESS THEIR LANGUAGE AND PAY THE PRICE FOR IT.”**

To counter this, in summer time during the school holiday, some parents and the ethnic leaders are trying to arrange ethnic literacy trainings. The aim is to maintain ethnic languages

among the younger generation. This also includes young people realizing the value of their language and their ethnic identity. Many individuals suppress their language and pay the price for it. It is important to consider what is being lost by the people when they lose their languages?

Losing your language also impacts on your culture. There is no doubt that language is part of the culture. Languages express the culture. When talking about the language, most of what you are talking about is culture. Culture also includes one's traditional way of life and the value that ethnic people give to belonging to a minority group. Culture plays a major role in the society. Culture refer music, arts, dress, language, religious, occasion, food, traditional dance and manners. Culture is "the way of life an entire society". When we lose our culture,

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the reality is that we lose all of these things.

Similarly non – Burman ethnic people also believe that culture present the way of their life and the symbol of their society. These are not little things for them to lose. The ethnic people know that through out the military’s rule they have lost some of their culture and traditional practices. The ruling junta strategically tries to oppress ethnic languages and culture in Burma; non – Burman ethnic people have no choice, and face difficulties to maintain their own language and culture.

Beside the prohibition of the ethnic language, the culture practices are also constantly being disturbed by the military junta. The military restricts ethnic people from enjoying their culture and practicing their traditions in many different ways. On the February 21st 1998 the junta ordered the Mon people to stop preparing to publicly celebrate the golden jubilee, a holiday the Mon people had been waiting for many years to come. This was a special occasion and the Mon people had prepared for nearly three months before the event. But the celebration was officially prohibited by the junta and the entire Mon population was angry. According to the junta it was unnecessary to celebrate the Mon golden jubilee because the junta had allowed the Mon people to celebrate Mon State Day (another Mon holiday). This action of the military regime showed how they are preventing ethnic people from practicing their culture. Since the military came to power, the ethnic people have also been deprived of right to enjoy freedom of expression and assembly.

Under the military ruling there is no respect for minority languages, and culture. The regime has actively attempted to marginalize the ethnic minority people in every aspect of society through militarization, intimidation tactics, and human right abuses. Firstly, the regimes try to kill the ethnic language by not giving people a chance to study them at school, even as a second language they are not allowed to studied at school. Secondly the regime employs a brutal, systematic strategy of repressing ethnic cultural practices and events.

The last tactic used by the regime is promoting inter-ethnic marriages. Children of mix marriages (ethnic people who are married to Burman) are often referred to as ethnically Burman rather than from the ethnic nationalities. The children speak Burmese as a first lan-



*A Karen boy reading a magazine, photo: Saw Kweh Say*

guage and are influenced by the Burman majority culture, because they lack access to their ethnic culture. Later on they consider themselves to be Burmese. Their ethnic identity, rather than embracing all elements, has been influenced by the majority community - in all essence dominated.

Through determination and community strength, the ethnic groups have found ways to express their cultural identity. However, they face struggles to preserve the survival of their cultures. The Burmese junta should ensure the people’s right to enjoy his or her own culture, to admit and practice their own language. Additionally, the junta needs to stop oppressing ethnic people’s opportunities to study their own language and practice their culture and traditions.

The ethnic people need to work doubly harder to get the right to practice religious teaching and culture freely, the right to teach, learn and promote language freely, and the right to uphold their identity without fear and live peacefully together with others. Ethnic people need to try and keep their homes as the central source of native language learning and try to combine the learning of ethnic languages with a focus on culture. The ethnic people should preserving promoting their culture and traditional such as dressing, traditional celebrating and way of living etc... for their children and they need to encourage their children. They are responsible for the survival of and the restoration of their culture and identity, even though the regime continuously eliminate the right o ethnic people practicing their culture.

# BURMA'S PRICE TAG:

## THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITIES' RESPONSE TO BURMA'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

BY SANTI PAP



There is no question that the people of Burma are facing one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Despite increased awareness of the severe oppression in Burma around the globe, the situation for the Burmese population grows worse each day. Whilst the junta plays a significant role in restricting aid agencies accessing and assisting vulnerable populations and prevents the development of civil society, one must ask: are donor countries doing enough or is Burma being placed in the "too hard" basket?

Humanitarian aid in Burma can be delivered via two channels: through Rangoon with the permission of the Burmese military junta or from neighbouring countries across the border. The Burmese military junta simultaneously is the sole conduit for humanitarian aid from Rangoon as well as being the primary root cause of the humanitarian problem. Community based organisations and non-governmental organisations working inside Burma are required to register the SPDC's Ministry of Interior. To register organisations must sign a Memoranda of Understanding with the junta, which imposes a number of restrictions, which organisations must agree to and abide by. Some restrictions include: limitation on what fields of work and areas where programmes can operate.

The junta also uses more subtle means to hinder humanitarian work within Burma, by arbitrarily denying visas for international staff for non-governmental organisations and UN agencies, restricting travel outside of Rangoon, forbidding organisations and agencies from data collection and refusing to meet with non-local staff. Recently the junta refused to renew the UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinator, Charles Petrie's, accreditation, effectively firing him from his position, stating that his continued presence was not conducive to fostering a good relationship between the junta and the UN. This decision came shortly after a group of international NGOs released a statement about their observations in Burma during the Saffron Revolution a few months earlier.

Furthermore the Ministry of Interior closely monitors CBOs and NGOs which hampers contact and

openness between the Burmese population and aid workers and negatively affects aid workers ability to monitor their project's effectiveness.

CBOs and organisations that work cross border from neighbouring countries face numerous challenges. Firstly military activities by all actors create an unstable situation for CBOs to work. As a result of militarisation by Burmese army troops, ceasefire groups and armed opposition groups, there are many unmarked landmine fields in Burma, which restricts aid workers travel. Additionally, there is a lot of mistrust between different villages, and even between people in one community. This makes it difficult for CBO staff to work with communities as villagers immediately assume they cannot be trusted.

Moreover, as villagers are working tirelessly to grow enough food or earn enough money to support their families it is difficult for them to part take in activities to improve their communities. Time spent on such activities means less time that they can spend on earning their livelihoods, and given the poverty that most of the population face, this is a serious issue. Consequently it can be difficult for CBOs to move beyond humanitarian relief, and to start rebuilding communities, given the need of the people.

Despite the fact that there being two methods for delivering aid in Burma, often extremely vulnerable populations still receive no assistance from either channel, for a number of reasons, including lack of access to the population, limited understanding of the needs of those people and limited resources (time, money and human). Additionally, aid is often restricted to one of the two aid delivery channels. If funding is made available for one, the other is often excluded from accessing money or in-kind support. DfID, a donor to the 3-D Fund (which aims to tackle TB, HIV/AIDS and Malaria in Burma), has said that the fund will work based on need. In eastern Burma malaria rates are consistently above 10 per cent of the population and in some areas they are as high as 22 per cent. Malaria related deaths in eastern Burma account for 45 per cent of all malaria fatalities in Burma. However, the regime places extreme restrictions on geographical areas that aid agencies can access, and DfID has said it cannot

give guarantees that activities of their fund will reach people in eastern Burma. And when the Karen National Union, an organisation fighting for a free Karen State, requested support from the 3-Disease fund to combat Malaria in Karen State, which has an extremely high rate of malaria, it was denied.

Furthermore there is a need for greater coordination between humanitarian agencies working inside Burma and cross-border. By developing a comprehensive humanitarian assistance plan, including 'needs' mapping exercises, it would be a step forward in ensuring that all people in need are being reached.

However, currently there is an environment of mistrust between organisations recognised by the SPDC to be working inside Burma and those who concentrate their efforts on cross border assistance. In order to increase coordination between these two aid channels, this mistrust needs to be overcome and measures put in place to safeguard the security of staff and information that is shared. International organisations are possibly better placed to start this process, as they are more aware of the efforts are being made from both sides and can potentially act as a bridge between the two.

In addition to assistance inside the country, there is a need for humanitarian assistance along Burma's borders. India, Bangladesh and Thailand all house refugee communities, with over 700,000 registered refugees living in these three countries and Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> Among these refugee and migrant communities, there is a growing civil society movement working for human rights, democracy, and social causes.

In total Burma receives an estimated US\$150 million in humanitarian assistance each year.<sup>2</sup> For a country with a population of 52 million,<sup>3</sup> that amounts to less than US\$3 per person. This is the level of funding deemed adequate by the international community to alleviate the chronic humanitarian crisis that engulfs the population, where 75 per cent of people lives below the poverty line<sup>4</sup> and 40 per cent are infected with TB.<sup>5</sup> One in five children in eastern Burma die before their fifth birthday<sup>6</sup>, while the national figure is one in ten.<sup>7</sup>

In comparison Zimbabwe, Timor Leste and Africa receives more funding from a single donor, DfID, the UK government's development arm, per person than Burma does from all donor countries and governments combined.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover despite the, lets be honest, limited humanitarian assistance that is going into Burma, the living standards of the people are continuing to decline. People are facing extreme difficulties in meeting their basic needs, and services such as

health care and education are a luxury for the rich. The people of Burma need to be thrown a rope, so that they can pull themselves out of the poverty abyss that has been forced upon them as a result of the junta's mass mismanagement of the country. While a mass increase in humanitarian assistance is a vital part, a genuine solution to the root causes of the humanitarian crisis is also necessary. Otherwise, all efforts will merely be stopgap measures and there will be a continued need for humanitarian assistance.

Consequently, while in the past donors have separated discussions about political reforms and humanitarian assistance, if a true solution to the crisis is to found, more efforts to change Burma's political, social and economic spheres is needed. Of the US\$150 million in humanitarian aid Burma receives each year only an estimated US\$10 million is spent on human rights and democracy projects in Burma. Each year human rights and organisations working for good governance operate on shoe-strings budgets want to expand their work and make a real difference, however are unable to due so to a lack of funds.

In Burma's neighbouring countries there is an emerging civil society especially among ethnic groups that address a number of different issues such as health, education, food security, community development, human rights, democracy, and many more. Some argue that funding these "exile" groups is not contributing to finding a solution in Burma and while it is true that the skills and civil society are being developed outside the country; many groups are transferring this knowledge to people inside Burma through the implementation of their programmes and are very clear in their plans to return to their homeland when there is genuine space for activism.

Without the development of a strong civil society which engages all people this crisis will continue unabated. Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy and noble peace prize winner, said "better governance is the answer to Burma's humanitarian crisis...the most important aspect of humanitarian assistance or any kind of assistance is good governance. Unless there is good governance, you cannot ensure that the assistance will really benefit the country".<sup>9</sup> Improved governance can only be achieved through the development of civil society and expanding human rights and democracy work, which requires more funding.

However, funding for these types of projects is seriously inadequate and is under threat. In the past three years the European Commission has slashed its funding of projects promoting human rights and democracy in Burma by more than halve. As organisations scramble to secure a small portion of available funding, their efforts to

## What humanitarian assistance is needed in eastern Burma?

A variety of humanitarian assistance is needed in eastern Burma. The most needed includes: security, food, education, health and community development.

### Security

Villagers have the basic knowledge needed to competently look after themselves. Given the opportunity they can grow enough food, run schools and clinics (hiring qualified staff) and govern their communities. However, currently they lack the physical security to do so. People in eastern Burma live in constant fear of the Burmese army and are always ready to flee. If grassroots communities had security they could start to invest in creating a permanent community for themselves, their families and neighbours. For villagers to have the physical security they need a genuine resolution to crisis in Burma is needed. This also involves demilitarisation, including the removal of landmines. Humanitarian organisations should continue to advocate for change, but also to empower grassroots communities to lead the change themselves.

### Food

Food scarcity is a serious problem for the population of eastern Burma. Most people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. In some areas villagers are forced to grow off-season crops, or risk having their land confiscated. People must also fulfill demands for forced labour from the SPDC. All these factors contribute to lower crop yields, which in turn affects people's food supplies. Consequently, across eastern Burma there is food insecurity. Most villagers' diets are inadequate. Malnutrition is rife, and in some areas intervention is necessary. Villagers need and want community-run programmes that make their villages more self-sufficient and stable in terms of food production. In addition to increasing food production, these programmes should also look at raising awareness of nutritional issues with community members.

### Education

Most villagers cite education as a priority for their community; however, the quality of education is very low in eastern Burma. Even in locations where there are schools issues, such as school closures, extortion of arbitrary fees, the theft of teachers' salaries, unmotivated teachers, lack of materials, sadly prevail. More support for education is needed in order to provide children with a better future. As the Burmese junta continues to under fund education and implements policies that are detrimental to education, other assistance is needed. The people of eastern Burma want support to provide basic education to their children and to develop skills that they can use in their communities to overcome some of issues they are facing daily, for example more agricultural skills to improve livelihoods.

### Health

Many people die from preventable or easily treatable diseases. Health services are virtually non-existent within the state, with health workers being poorly trained and clinics lacking very basic equipment and medicines. In some areas there are no clinics or medical service providers. There is a need for more health services in eastern Burma and health workers need to have unrestricted access to all parts of the population. Additionally, people need clean drinking water, appropriate sanitation, and education about basic health care, including disease prevention.

### Community Development

Communities have many great ideas about how to improve their living standards, livelihoods and social services. These include: crop diversification, building dams and bridges for community use, health clinics, schools and self-reliance programmes to name a few. These initiatives are usually developed via a participatory means and bring real benefits for the grassroots communities.

However, communities often lack the resources necessary to implement these ideas. Attempts at fundraising are made, however, communities usually struggle to reach their targets, especially without outside assistance. As villagers' efforts to develop their community's continually fail, they become disillusioned and focus on their survival.

rebuild their communities and countries are being severely limited because donor nations have put a price tag on the Burmese people's future and have said it costs too much.

Sadly, it is not only civil society groups that are facing funding shortages, but also organisations that provide basic necessities to displace and refugee populations. Organisations providing food, shelter and services to Burmese refugees in Thailand, such as the Thailand Burma Border Consortium and the International Rescue Committee, are facing serious funding shortages, wherein they have had to reduce food allowances and services to refugee communities.<sup>10</sup>

The calls from donors for exit strategies and claims that they cannot keep supporting the people of Burma indefinitely are being heard loudly and funding reductions demonstrate that they are serious. However, the level of humanitarian funding to Burma does not reflect the needs of the population and is not conducive in enabling the Burmese people's to bring about the political, social and economic changes they so desperately want and need. Whilst the expression "you need to spend money to make money" can not be applied in its entirety to this situation, the simple truth is if we genuinely want to see the people of Burma enjoy peace, democracy, human rights and justice, we need to support them in a meaningful, useful way.

Generations have not known peace, and young people in their early 20s are working now, not for

a better future for themselves but for the next generation because they have resigned themselves to the fact that they will not see change in their lifetimes.

Are we really saying that the price of peace and justice for Burma is too much? Isn't the cost of doing nothing higher?

#### End Notes

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- 4 Economist Country Profile 2004
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- 7 "World Health Statistic 2007", [http://www.who.int/whosis/database/core/core\\_select\\_process.cfm](http://www.who.int/whosis/database/core/core_select_process.cfm) , accessed November 2007
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- 9 August 2002, "Humanitarian Assistance to Burma: How to establish good governance in the provision of humanitarian aid – ensuring aid reaches the right people in the right way", Burma UN Service Desk, March 2003
- 10 "Budget cuts at Thai-Burmese border", The Irrawaddy, January 15, 2008

## NEWS BRIEFS

**Petrie's out of Burma:** The SPDC does not want Charles Petrie, the UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinator, to continue to serve in Burma, especially at this time when cooperation between Burma and the United Nations is crucial, the junta said in its statement handed to Charles Petrie.

Charles Petrie, the United Nations in-country coordinator in Burma, left the Southeast Asian after the ruling junta refused to renew his accreditation last month, a UN official in Rangoon said.

The UN Secretary-General condemned the move by the Burmese junta and expressed his support for Mr Petrie.

Petrie has led the UN country team in Burma since 2003.

**Burma's first human case of bird flu:** The World Health Organization and Burma's state-owned media has confirmed the country's first human case of bird flu which was detected in a girl.

The girl who was hospitalised, has now recovered.

Earlier, the Burmese authorities concealed the information on the girl despite detection of bird flu in Shan State which Mizzima reported on September 29.

**International community's patience with Burma 'running out':** Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged Burma's authorities to step up their efforts towards democratization and the full respect of human rights, noting that the international community's patience with the troubled South-East Asian nation is wearing thin.

Calling the appointment of a liaison minister who is in contact with Aung San Suu Kyi "a good beginning," he called for further efforts for dialogue.

The people of Burma have suffered from isolation for a very long time, the Secretary-General stated, adding that it is high time for them to enjoy genuine democracy and freedom. "This is what the international community expects."

He highlighted the special role and responsibility of the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) in further promoting democracy in Burma.

## BURMA ISSUES/PEACE WAY FOUNDATION

Burma Issues was founded in 1990 as a private non-profit organisation devoted to peacefully addressing Burma's struggle for human rights and democratic rule. Burma Issues operates under the umbrella of the Peace Way Foundation. The Peace Way Foundation was given legal status as a non-governmental organisation in 2002.

Our organisation believes that all ethnic groups within Burma have the right to equality in all areas of life and to live in a society free from ethnic chauvinism. Burma Issues' bottom-up approach to building a grassroots movement plays a significant role in offering non-violent participatory solutions that come from the people inside Burma's grassroots communities. The movement's work directly confronts chauvinism by introducing sustainable, just alternatives to their situation.

### **Our aim:**

To participate in building up a people's movement of the marginalized people that is capable of carrying out the long-term struggle necessary to bring a true and lasting peace with justice to Burma.

### **Our objectives:**

- ◆ To systematically document the events of the past and present them through a documentation centre, in order to do effective analysis and to create strategies for building a better future. This will focus on information for the internal movement and for external supportive campaigns.
- ◆ To build up activists who have a vision for true change in Burma, are responsible and disciplined and are clear in the nature of their commitment for the long-term struggle.
- ◆ To encourage grassroots people to lead the struggle for social, economic and political change in Burma.
- ◆ To build up international awareness and support for the struggle in Burma by acting as a bridge between the grassroots people and the international support community in such a way that the grassroots people help international support groups focus actions on the critical issues which prolong the country's cycle of war.

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