



Problems Facing Burma

By Zlatica Hoke

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At a recent economic summit of Asian and European countries in Finland [September 10-11], European officials urged Burma to improve its human rights record and release detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Burma's military rulers said they need more time. In the meantime, the government is withdrawing from the coastal Rangoon to a new administrative capital in the hinterland.

Since last November when Burma's secretive military rulers announced the government was moving to a new administrative capital, there has been intense speculation about the reason for the abrupt transfer. The new capital, built in the sparsely populated central region, is called Nay Pyi Taw, or the Seat of Kings.

Many experts see this as a clear sign that Burma's most senior general, Than Shwe, wants to emulate the country's former kings who built capitals in honor of their dynasties. Many analysts quote some Burmese as saying that the remote location was picked on the advice of fortune tellers, who play an important role in the local culture.



Burma (Myanmar)

But David Steinberg, Director of the Asian Studies Program at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, says the move away from Rangoon may reflect the ruling junta's growing insecurity.

"One explanation [for moving the capital] is to get away from the coast and the possibility of an American invasion," says Steinberg. "It sounds ludicrous to Americans at this particular stage in our history, but there are people who believe that. Secondly, it is to get away from possible demonstrations in the city of

Rangoon, which has five million people. It can be quite volatile, as we saw in 1988. But Nay Pyi Taw is a very controlled area."

Professor Steinberg says the junta, which has been in power since 1988, is increasingly isolated from mainstream society.

"Basically, the military is a state within the state. The military has not only its own military facilities; it has its own markets -- its P.X. commissaries [i.e., retail stores]. It has its own school system for families. It has its own hospitals. It even has its own favorite monasteries. So basically, it operates separately from the civilian society around it," says Steinberg.

But by most accounts, the military keeps a tight grip on every aspect of civilian life, controlling resources, suppressing freedoms and violating human rights to stay in power. One of the most blatant examples of repressions in Burma, most experts say, is the protracted house arrest of opposition leader and Nobel Prize winner Aung Sun Suu Kyi. Her National League for Democracy won the 1990 general election, but the military regime refused to step down.

Ethnic Tensions

International human rights groups list Burma, or Myanmar as the Burmese government calls it, as among the top ten countries with the worst human rights record. Sophie Richardson, Deputy Director of the Asia Division at Human Rights Watch, says, for example, that the forced relocations of minority groups in Burma have resulted in the destruction of thousands of villages.



VOA photo - R. Corben

Karen National Union headquarters at Mu Aye Pu in January of this year

could provide humanitarian aid to some 80-thousand internally displaced people. In addition, she says the Burmese regime forces civilians to provide free labor for the government, including for the construction of the new capital.

"The ones that we've documented took place throughout 2004 and 2005, primarily in Karen state, which is in the eastern part of the country. The government describes it as putting down ethnic insurgencies," says Richardson. "The problem is that they [i.e., the people] get moved so frequently [that] they are not able to grow anything. And often what the military will do is kill live stock or burn crops or burn homes, so that there's effectively nothing to come back to."

Richardson says the government denies access to these areas for international aid agencies that

The international community has tried to coax Burma's generals to reform. Several Asian countries have pursued a policy of constructive engagement to get Burma to change, rather than economic sanctions and isolation, favored by the United States and Europe. But neither approach has had much effect.

Burma's Economy

Some analysts say a unified international boycott of Burma would make a difference. Usha Haley, Director of the Global Business Center at the University of New Haven in Connecticut, says Western businesses that have pulled out of Burma have been quickly replaced. Professor Haley adds that some of Burma's neighbors cooperate with the regime because it is in their interests. "China is a huge military benefactor for Burma. China supplies the arms to the military junta. Cambodia and Laos have generally supported Burma and there are economic linkages between the ruling coalitions in Thailand and in Burma."

Nonetheless, Professor Haley says Burma's economy has stalled. Racked by high inflation and with many of its people unable pay their taxes, the Burmese government has been forced to auction off the country's precious gem stones as a source of revenue -- a program that was originally intended to curtail smuggling.



Chinese workers saw logs from Burma

Some analysts say that putting Burma on the U.N. Security Council agenda would force its leadership to improve its human rights record. Georgetown University's David Steinberg says if that does not happen, the economic situation may eventually force Burma to join the global economy and accept international human rights standards. But he warns that it will be a slow process.

"There are over 40 international N.G.O.s [i.e., non-governmental organizations] operating in Burma today doing different things. So the idea here is to build up concepts of pluralism -- local centers of authority that can influence the government and you are talking about change over time," says Steinberg.

In the meantime, many analysts say that the Burmese government's move to a new and remote capital is another maneuver to extend its hold on power.

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