

REBUILDING A DEMOCRATIC BURMA
Strategies
for
Sustainable Development

CONFERENCE REPORT

venue:

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Contents

Introduction *Maureen Aung-Thwin, Open Society Institute Burma Project*

Executive Summary

Conference Discussion Summaries

- Panel 1:* Economic Development: Promising Prospects, Major Obstacles
- Panel 2:* Drug Control: Illicit Production, Trafficking, and Drug
Addiction/AIDS
- Panel 3:* Challenges of Governance: Role of The Ethnic Minorities in
a Democratic Burma — Federation, Union, or Separation?
- Panel 4:* Role of Non-Governmental Organizations, U.N. Agencies,
And Foundations in Strengthening Civil Society
- Panel 5:* The Role of The Media in Promoting Civil Society
- Panel 6:* Education And Health: Restoring Literacy and Learning;
Developing Primary Health Care
- Panel 7:* Preserving Burma's Resources: Environmental Protection and
Historic Preservation
- Panel 8:* The Next Generation: The Students' Perspective

Conclusion: Looking Ahead

Appendices

Conference Background Note

Conference Agenda

Participants Contact List

About the Sponsors:

- Drug Strategies
- Opens Society Institute Burma Project

INTRODUCTION

Maureen Aung-Thwin, *Director, Open Society Institute Burma Project*

From 23-26 March 1998, two dozen people from Burma and several other nations gathered at Bellagio, Italy, to discuss priorities for addressing the most pressing problems facing Burma today and for its future.

The meeting's title, *Rebuilding a Democratic Burma: Strategies for Sustainable Development*, states its theme succinctly. The organizers purposefully chose not to review the distressing state of affairs in Burma today, which is reported by mass media, the United Nations, human rights monitors and other groups, but to promote candid discussion on long-term requisites to building a peaceful and prosperous state.

This report is a summary of the conference's discussions. It is presented as a record of the information offered and perspectives shared, and, more important, to disseminate the suggested ways forward regarding the important problems that the conference addressed.

We hope that these suggestions will be considered seriously by organizations and individuals working inside Burma or on issues related to the country. Comments are most welcome, and may be sent to burma@sorosny.org.

Due to the difficult circumstances of their work in a sensitive environment, several people who attended this meeting asked not to be identified, for fear of being refused permission to re-enter Burma. In the discussion summaries, therefore, only general descriptions of participants are given.

This report is available on the Burma Project home page.

Grateful appreciation is extended to the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study and Conference Center for hosting the meeting in a most gracious and efficient manner. Thanks also to participants who prepared thoughtful presentations and contributed candidly and constructively to our discussions.

The conference was organized by the Open Society Institute Burma Project and Drug Strategies, and co-chaired with me by Drug Strategies President Mathea Falco.

This report was written by Burma Project consultant Thomas R. Lansner. Every effort was made to accurately report our discussions; any inaccuracies are regretted. ρ

Executive Summary

The conference, "Rebuilding a Democratic Burma: *Strategies for Sustainable Development*," addressed a wide array of problems facing Burma today. Experts in several areas described challenges that are blocking Burma's social and economic development, causing conflict, and threatening its cultural and ecological landscape. They also suggested solutions both short and long-term to resolve these challenges. The suggestions summarized in this report are offered in the spirit of free and open debate. They do not necessarily represent the viewpoints of all of the individual participants or of the sponsoring organizations.

Participants reached broadest consensus on three major points:

- A negotiated political solution involving Burma's democratic opposition and ethnic minority groups as well as the country's military is a base line requirement for addressing the country's most pressing economic and social problems and to promoting long-term peace and prosperity.
- The current military regime is incapable of seriously addressing the country's basic problems, for both political and practical reasons. A lack of formal education and expertise in economic and development issues among the junta's members is a serious obstacle. The regime's heavy spending on military expansion, which leaves scant funding for social programs, is another. A third is the ruling generals' apparent unwillingness to seriously consider power-sharing and meaningful autonomy for the country's many minority ethnic groups. Finally, the junta's reliance on cease-fires that permit opium-growing and illicit drug production and trading by some ceasefire groups, and reliance on drug proceeds to bolster a failed economy, are major obstacles to addressing narcotics, security, and political issues.
- On virtually every issue, lack of relevant and reliable information clouds comprehension of and cripples capacity to creatively respond to economic and social problems. Some data is absent simply because no skilled practitioners are available to collect and analyze it. Other information is withheld or distorted by the regime, apparently in order not to harm Burma's international image.

Principal suggestions include:

- Burma's educational and health systems are deteriorating rapidly, and should be priority areas for future assistance. Self-reliance and community-based approaches to development should be encouraged in the field
- After decades of internal civil and ethnic conflict, conflict resolution and strategies of peaceful transition to a democratic system should be promoted.
- Protection should be increased and greater educational and income-generation opportunities be provided for Burmese refugees in neighboring countries.

- Greater transparency should be sought from United Nations agencies and from non-governmental organizations working in Burma.
- Greater communication and coordination among non-governmental organizations and donors working on Burma issues would permit better use of scarce resources.
- NGOs should seek to better inform media of their activities, and acquire training to do so.
- Increased use of available media should be made to raise awareness of social problems and encourage AIDS/drug prevention, including in minority languages.
- Burmese-language broadcasting services should increase programming dealing with economic literacy, human rights and the role of civil society. New and existing educational materials on these subjects should be more widely distributed in Burmese and ethnic languages.
- Cultural preservation requires both formal and informal approaches to document languages, record oral histories and protect remaining art and artifacts.

These points are reflected in the discussion summaries below and the *Looking Ahead* priorities listed after each discussion summary. ρ

Conference Discussions

Panel 1:

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: PROMISING PROSPECTS, MAJOR OBSTACLES

Discussion Summary

A leading Burmese economist observed that Burma is a resource-rich country that has suffered from bad management by military regimes, which have shown little understanding of economic realities and anti-intellectual tendencies.

The country today is clearly living beyond its means, especially since the limited economic liberalization which began in 1989. Like the Burmese fruit, *giardi*, the junta's economic changes appear inviting, but in fact offer little substance or sustenance. Burma today is developing a "crony and phony" capitalism that does not provide basis for real development or progress.

Understanding what is really going on in Burma's economy is difficult because of the profound lack of transparency and asymmetric information. The country's real population is not even known. Few reliable statistics exist: one participant familiar with health and education issues described the official statistics as "fairy tales." Some scattered and incomplete data are available from the United Nations and non-governmental organization (NGOs). The United Nations Development Programme 1997 Human Development Index ranks Burma as 133 of 176 countries rated.

"Burma's economy and financial systems are lacking in the basic requirements for lasting development, and remain highly idiosyncratic and volatile."
— Burmese economist

The economist also argued that short-term economic prospects are dim, and the economy could collapse entirely. Severe floods in 1997 destroyed large amounts of the country's rice crop. This has forced a halt to rice exports, and exacerbated a foreign exchange shortage. Recently imposed restrictions on border trade are aimed at reducing demand for foreign exchange. Due to the overall economic crisis in Asia, many of the estimated two million Burmese working as illegal immigrants in neighboring countries may be expelled from their temporary residences, and are unlikely to find work at home.

This influx could raise social tensions. Yet despite its economic incompetence, the military regime is efficient and organized in maintaining its rule through armed force, especially against a fragmented opposition.

Another economic specialist said that a comprehensive report by 12 Burmese economists on Burma's economic future is expected to be published in late 1998 by Singapore University. The

report emphasizes the need to establish now long-term alternatives for Burma's economic development.

It is clear, the specialist added, that the economic reform process cannot proceed unless it is accompanied by political reform. Economic policy is dominated by the junta and a narrow elite close to the military. Roughly 40-50% of the state budget is consumed by the military. The ruling junta's need to control society impels it to adopt poor and counterproductive economic policies — for example, expanding government bureaucracies. The consequence is unsustainable consumption of domestic resources and foreign inputs.

It was suggested that the main priorities to be pursued include restoring economic confidence by monetary reform and exchange rate stabilization at a realistic rate, and developing and exploiting resources of greatest comparative advantage, particularly in the agricultural area.

The crux of a strategy to revive Burma's economy is education. Re-establishing the educational system generally is essential, and specialized training for economists, statisticians and financial analysts is necessary to provide sufficient expertise to run Burma's economy rationally in the future.

"Education is a key issue. Economists, statisticians and financial analysts must be trained now to run Burma's economy rationally in the future."

— Burmese economic researcher

It was noted that while the junta is showing some signs of recognizing the need for genuine change, it has not yet effected real reform. The Office of Strategic Services, which serves as a think tank for junta's military intelligence wing, has organized closed meetings to assess the Burmese economy at which some criticism of regime policies was tolerated. These criticisms have received no public airing, however, and the few independent publications publishing economic information are censored if they discuss issues the junta deems sensitive.

Military Intelligence chief and junta leader Lt. General Khin Nyunt himself recently admitted that Burma's economy is in very bad condition. Yet the regime is moving backwards instead of forward in opening the economy, as demonstrated by the March 1998 decree that stripped private banks of the right to trade in foreign exchange.

In the near term, Burma's rising economic duress may evoke several serious consequences. It could encourage resistance to the military regime, or splits in the junta's ranks. Financial inflows from the drug trade, expatriate transfers, and royalties from gas exports expected to come on line late in 1998, however, may offer the junta sufficient funds to avoid economic collapse. For now, economic distress has led to corruption throughout Burmese society. Civil servants and bureaucrats can only survive by working other jobs or taking bribes.

Burma's July 1997 admission to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could provide opportunities for economic growth, but the country's instability and double-tier exchange system (the *kyat* is overvalued by over 3000 per cent) are barriers to greater trade. p

Looking Ahead:**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

- Priorities for developing Burma's economy begin with gathering reliable data.
- Domestic capacities for economic research and analysis must be rebuilt.
- Comparative studies of other transitional economies could offer guidance for better policies in Burma.
- Educational efforts regarding the market economy should be undertaken, including through media outlets.
- Inflows of international aid and investment should be tracked closely to monitor use and promote accountability. The effect of foreign investment should be monitored for economic, humanitarian and political effects.
- The impact of Burma's membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should be assessed.
- Greater transparency by UN agencies working in Burma (including FAO, WHO, UNDCP, UNDP, and UNICEF) and by NGOs operating in Burma, should be encouraged to understand their social and economic impact.

Panel 2:**DRUG CONTROL: ILLICIT PRODUCTION, TRAFFICKING,
AND DRUG ADDICTION/AIDS*****Discussion Summary***

An expert on international drug issues said that Burma is today the world's largest producer of opium and heroin, and an increasingly important supplier of illicit methamphetamines. Burma's 3,000 metric ton annual opium production, and the roughly 300 metric tons of heroin refined from it, are greater than the rest of the world's production combined. The huge amount of Burmese heroin available dwarfs the yearly United States annual domestic heroin consumption of four to five metric tons.

It is believed that narcotics earnings now provide about half of Burma's GDP. The pervasiveness of drug money affects Burma's economic, political and social life at several levels. Immense profits are reaching the very top levels of Burmese society. In Burma, as anywhere in the world, hard currency follows hard drugs, and illicit profits find their way into the regular economy. In Burma, the effect is amplified because the rest of the economy is so weak, and drug money is playing an increasingly central role.

This huge income is generated by rising heroin production in Burma that has vastly increased the quantities of heroin available for export and for domestic use. As the cost of heroin has dropped precipitously, consumption and addiction is increasing in Burma, neighboring countries and around the world.

*"Heroin production is a problem not only for Western countries.
It is hitting Burma very hard right now, with massive addiction
and AIDS spread by intravenous drug use."
— Narcotics expert*

In Burma today, there is little official recognition and action to confront the spreading problem of heroin addiction. In some areas, opium use is traditional and medicinal, but there has been a shift in the last few years to intravenous heroin use. Despite a heroin addiction and associated AIDS crisis of epidemic proportions, there is little prevention educational and other activities, or treatment for addicts.

While drug trafficking and addiction is particularly pernicious in Burma, it is also part of a global problem. Examination of experiences and parallels with other countries could be useful. Bolivia has been a major cocoa producer in Latin America since the Banzer dictatorship in the 1970s. Yet even the current elected democratic government there now has difficulties in tackling the problem. Economic growth is crucial to providing economic alternatives. An example is in Thailand, where even in hill areas, economic growth and opportunity has reduced opium growing.

In Burma, the efforts to limit narcotics production and use are interwoven with the need to address democratization, resolution of ethnic disputes, governing structures, and economic development. Social programs that include education, health care, and prevention and treatment programs must be encouraged.

A base line requirement is the commitment at highest levels of all groups in society to eliminate illegal drugs as a way of life and as a source of income. Absent this commitment, drug production and use will remain a serious problem. Thus, counternarcotics efforts in Burma today are ineffective and show little chance of early success. At a practical level, counternarcotics assistance would under present conditions be a waste of money. There must a set of incentives as well as disincentives to wean people from opium production. Substitute means of livelihood must be available.

A Burmese participant suggested that the best way to disrupt the drug trade is to identify its financiers on an international level. Who finances and profits from drug distribution. What are the international linkages? The most profitable branches of a top Canadian bank are in the Cayman Islands and Bermuda, where banking regulations regarding international funds transfers are notably lax. It was noted that the bulk of investment in Burma is from companies and banks registered in the Cayman Islands. Another source of financing and laundering of drug moneys is the informal ethnic Chinese banking system throughout Southeast Asia and further afield.

A development expert with experience in Burma agreed that the problem of addiction within Burma is growing quickly. Yet with strong political commitment, production and trafficking can be stopped. An example is the successful 1990 ban by the Kachin Independence Organization on all opium activities in areas it controls. But in other Kachin areas under junta control, especially around jade mines at Mogok, there are severe levels of heroin addiction and AIDS spread by sharing of contaminated needles. Northern Shan State is another heroin/AIDS hot spot where trafficking has corrupted the administrative structures. The regime, it was suggested, remains in a state of "active denial" regarding the nature and scale of the addiction and AIDS problem.

Increased regional trade and communications are making the narcotics trade harder to control. There is increased domestic vehicular traffic within Burma and few checks on trade from narcotics-producing areas. A Burmese specialist on events in the country's ethnic minority areas observed that the illegal cultivation of opium and production and trafficking of narcotics is inextricably intertwined with questions of ethnic conflict, central authority and local autonomy, and economic development. A highly disturbing part of the ongoing war in Shan State is forcible relocation of villages by the military junta and attacks on displaced people and refugees.

"Narcotics and the sex trade are intertwined with forty years of wars in Burma's borderlands, and with repression and lack of economic opportunity for ethnic minority peoples."

— Burmese researcher on the sex trade

Despite the surrender of reputed heroin warlord and Shan guerrilla leader Khun Sa to the military junta in January 1996, more acreage is under poppy cultivation in Shan State than ever before. This is a direct result of not only a lack of official efforts to reduce cultivation, but also a reflection of the area's extreme poverty and scarce economic opportunities. Opium growing is in fact spreading in several areas of Burma today, and is tolerated by the junta.

A participant familiar with recent anti-narcotics efforts in Burma said that in 1997-98, there had been limited but real efforts at poppy eradication in Kokang and Shan states. The complexity of the narcotics problem in Burma defies simple solutions and also demands that no single group be identified as its principal cause.

A Thai participant noted that in Thailand, better law enforcement and closer attention to money laundering has helped reduce trafficking, and observed that regional political, military and police commanders are important actors in suppressing or abetting the drug trade.

A close observer of the cross-border sex trade noted that trafficking of women falls into the same pattern as trafficking of narcotics, but with a different "product." Economic necessity, exacerbated by junta military campaigns, has driven many Shan and other ethnic minority Burmese people to seek jobs in Thailand, where, until at least mid-1997, the economy was booming. However, much of the work for Burmese immigrants is limited to difficult and ill-paid jobs, including day work on construction sites or simply breaking stone. Illegal immigrants are easily exploited, and often earn no more than 30 *baht* (USD 0.75) for a full day's manual labor.

Another main area of employment for Shan and other ethnic minority women from Burma is prostitution. Each year, thousands of young women, some as young as twelve years old, are sold into Thai brothels. They are joined by smaller numbers of women from Laos and ethnic minority women from China's Yunnan Province. Most are under 20 years old and are forced to work 10-12 hours daily, sometimes having sex with a dozen or more clients in a single day.

The sex trade is highly organized by criminal syndicates with at least the acquiescence of authorities at various levels both in Thailand and Burma. The young women are often lured to Thailand with offers of legitimate employment as housekeepers or restaurant workers, but then kept as virtual slaves in brothels. Their families are sometimes paid initial bonuses, which the women must pay off from their prostitution earnings. This is often virtually impossible, since pimps and brothel owners take a large share of customer payments. Frequently, the women are turned over to Thai authorities when they have almost paid off their "contracts," fined heavily, and deported moneyless to border areas where they are often recruited to the brothels once again.

A recent change in the sex trade along Burma's frontiers is that the job is now deadly. Trafficking of women is escalating the regional AIDS epidemic. Many young sex workers are developing HIV/AIDS. Once they show symptoms, they are expelled from brothels. Both push and pull factors are helping expand the sex industry. There is demand from within Thailand, and also a ready supply of very poor Burmese women. The Burmese women are often seen as desirable because they are more "exotic." There is strong demand for ever-younger women — or girls — who are believed less likely to be HIV-positive.

A Thai participant noted that there is little work done to help prostitutes in Thailand, and even efforts by Thai NGOs mostly excludes non-Thai sex workers.

An academic from the region raised a warning that the Asian economic crisis will increase prostitution as other economic opportunity decreases, especially for ethnic minorities. He suggested that studies of the situation are required to understand its scale, and possible responses in cooperation with women's groups and other NGOs in Thailand. A researcher recently in Burma added that there are signs that sex trade is penetrating new areas, for example, Rakhine State since 1995.

The dearth of official Burmese response to the crisis and a lack of civil society structures to address social needs within Burma was pointed out by a Burmese participant, who said few, if any, genuine indigenous NGOs exist today in Burma. The junta is organizing a new quasi-NGO, "The National Council for Women," but its independence is dubious, as it is headed by wives of senior junta members. As anywhere, NGOs will require greater or lesser degrees of official cooperation to achieve their objectives. Strengthening autonomous local NGOs could help build community participation and to monitor and improve the effectiveness of governmental development projects. p

Looking Ahead:

DRUGS TRAFFICKING AND THE SEX TRADE

- There is an urgent need to promote prevention and education regarding drug use, AIDS awareness, and trafficking of women. External media such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), Radio Free Asia (RFA), and Voice of America (VOA) could serve as valuable conduits for such information in Burmese and ethnic minority languages. Avenues to create internal educational capacities should also be explored.
- Reliable data on drug production, narcotics use and addiction, and money flows related to the trade is lacking and hampers proper planning, and may be gathered under present circumstances mostly through unofficial studies.
- A "bottom-up" approach that includes real contact with affected people is required, but may not be possible through official channels.
- Comparative studies of both narcotics and HIV/AIDS experiences and programs in Thailand and other neighboring countries could provide useful lessons for Burma.
- Involvement of ASEAN-based and other Asian NGOs on drug and AIDS issues would offer regional experience and may be more palatable to the junta.
- Repatriation of Burmese sex workers from Thailand should be monitored by international agencies to ensure their safety.
- United Nations agencies should be more transparent and accountable in their activities.
- Options for building local capacities of Burmese indigenous NGOs not controlled by the regime should be explored, and UN agencies and foreign NGOs should be strongly encouraged to facilitate these groups' capacities.

Panel 3:

CHALLENGES OF GOVERNANCE: ROLE OF THE ETHNIC MINORITIES IN A DEMOCRATIC BURMA --

FEDERATION, UNION, OR SEPARATION?

Discussion Summary

An expert who has written extensively on Burma's ethnic mosaic observed that ethnic conflict has been a longstanding part of Burma's history, and has continued through democratic governments and dictatorial regimes since independence in 1948. The ethnic minority areas have also become entangled in political maneuvering among the ethnic Burman elites who have ruled the country for the last 50 years. Turbulence within the ruling circles in Rangoon reaches ethnic minority areas. As the ruling junta seeks to reformulate the country's constitutional arrangement and open its economy, the next years are critical to recharting ethnic politics and ethnic relations within Burma.

A Burmese participant commented that the major dilemma of ethnic relations within the country that became independent as the Union of Burma in 1948 is relations between the rulers and the ruled. The principal question to be addressed is how different ethnic/cultural groups can live together under one flag without conflict.

What is today modern Burma is constituted of what was in effect "British Indochina," which like its French equivalent, was comprised of distinct areas. Burma proper was areas of Burman settlement and traditional Burman kingdoms. Attached to British imperial Burma were frontier areas inhabited by non-Burman peoples and the specially designated Karenni Protectorate.

"Military regimes since 1962 have used Burman ethnocentrism as a mobilizing tool for Burmese nationalism, excluding Burma's ethnic minority peoples from affairs of state and marginalizing their home areas."

— Burmese writer on ethnic issues

In 1947, pre-independence negotiations produced the Panglong Accord, which established co-equal states within the Union of Burma. The 1947 constitution was asymmetrical, but broadly accepted by most ethnic groups as the instrument of governance until it was abrogated after the 1962 army coup led by General Ne Win.

Since 1962, military regimes have focused on Burman ethnocentrism as the focal point of Burmese nationalism. This has hurt relations with ethnic minorities. The "Union of Burma" created under British rule does not exist in fact anymore, and its premise must be rethought. Burman political leaders and elite must reassess their position on federalism and ethnic cooperation. There must be an end to chauvinism before real multiculturalism can take hold. If autonomy and genuine participation in national life for ethnic groups cannot be negotiated, there should be an amicable parting of the ways. Burma needs multicultural structures to allow autonomy and to manage conflict and cooperation towards the common good.

A Karen participant said that the long history of mistrust between ethnic peoples and the Burman majority must be addressed as a first step toward reconciliation and peaceful political

development. This certainly does not mean there will be immediate agreement on all issues. It is possible and in fact usual to have "creative disagreements" within democracies.

The experience of Burman students who fled the SLORC crackdown in 1988 to border areas gave them a new perspective on the realities of repression against ethnic peoples. The Burman resistance was sheltered mostly in Karen areas.

The junta seeks to retain power for a small Burman elite by inducing or furthering divisions among sometimes fractious opposition groups along ethnic and religious lines. The rise of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) is an example. This split of the Karen National Union (KNU), which the KNU leadership failed to anticipate, was encouraged by the junta. The new and younger leaders of the KNU are more sophisticated and more cosmopolitan, but failed to effectively challenge the long-established leadership. KNU policy calls for all ethnic groups to have their own states within a federal union. The current political impasse can only be broken by tripartite dialogue among the military junta, the National League for Democracy and ethnic minority groups.

International assistance to pro-democratic forces is well-intentioned, but has often produced new problems. For example, few of the visas issued by the US government to refugees from Burma are granted to ethnic minorities. And the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' definition of "people of concern" in Thailand is much more easily applied to students fleeing the regime's recent repression than ethnic peoples who have been subject to severe attacks for decades. The international community gives much more attention to the Burman-led and urban-based National League for Democracy and its leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (and through this to the majority Burman community), than to events on the border directly affecting ethnic peoples. Another Burmese participant agreed, observing that most media, diplomatic, and UN reporting from Burma is focused on the Rangoon-based struggle between the junta and the NLD.

Cooperation among Burman-dominated pro-democracy groups in exile and ethnic organizations, the KNU representative concluded, should be increased at every opportunity.

A Burmese student leader agreed, saying the All Burma Students Democratic Front and ethnic groups found common enemy in the military junta, and common goals of democracy, human rights, and pluralism. There is a need for a more open society and understanding among Burmans and ethnic groups. The cooperation between Burman students and ethnic groups along the Burma-Thailand frontier has created much greater awareness and understanding of the reality of ethnic politics in Burma. Another participant noted that internal divisions within both ethnic groups and the student movement have hindered effective opposition to the military regime.

"Cooperation between ethnic groups and the student movement and other pro-democracy groups is essential. Our experience on the border has taught us about ethnic realities in Burma, which the military regime has always distorted."

— Burmese student leader

A health researcher who has worked in western Burma noted that while the situation for ethnic groups along Burma's borders with Bangladesh and India is also very difficult, the area is far less accessible than the Burma-Thai frontier and so receives little international attention. The security and development situation of Rohingya people in northern Rakhine, who have been subject to repeated military attacks, remains precarious.

A draft constitution created in consultation with all pro-democracy groups is being refined. There is a need for more venues for free discussion and interchange among pro-democracy groups. Training, education and exposure are needed for people to understand and act to promote and protect their rights.

A writer on Burma noted that there is great confusion within and outside Burma about what roles the army and the central government would play under any new constitutional dispensation. In ceasefire areas, ethnic groups are taking on new roles in governance and re-establishing political ties and bases into areas controlled by the junta. Widespread uncertainty remains concerning how these new dispensations will develop and what they will mean, so most ethnic groups are maintaining flexible and even ambiguous positions. The lack of information is exacerbated by the ceasefire groups' very limited contact with the outside world. A Burmese student commented that the ceasefire groups can trade and engage in some public activities, but cannot speak out against the regime publicly.

Several participants commented on the junta's proposed new constitution, which has been under consideration by the closely-controlled National Convention for nearly five years. A Burmese academic said the new constitution contains provisions that will not be accepted by ceasefire groups. No new constitution has been promulgated because the junta is divided and cannot agree on a strategy. A student leader said adoption or imposition of a new constitution could create splits and discord within ceasefire/ethnic groups. Hostilities could again erupt if the military regime demands new arrangements that require ethnic minority forces to disband before substantive political reform and transitional arrangements have been nationally and locally agreed.

A Thai participant injected a cautionary note, asking if the written constitution is relevant to defining real power relationships at this time. Thailand has had many constitutions, he said, which have been little more than background for the actual distribution of power. ρ

Looking Ahead:**CHALLENGES OF GOVERNANCE**

- Institutions or individuals who can best serve as facilitators to encourage tripartite dialogue among ethnic minority groups, the Burman democratic opposition, and the military junta, must be identified and empowered. The UN Secretary-General's current mandate should be pursued vigorously.
- Definitions of the problem and terms of debate must be refined in a manner acceptable to all participants.
- Given Burma's historic of ethnic conflict and its disastrous impact on the country, peaceful resolution of minority problems must be prioritized and long-term approaches and mechanisms pursued. All ethnic groups should be included in discussions, workshops and conferences leading up to broader negotiations.
- Conflict resolution scenarios and experience from other countries should be considered.
- Thai and other ASEAN and regional academics and NGOs might serve as catalysts and unofficial channels for initial contacts and confidence building measures.
- Burmese refugees in neighboring countries should receive increased protection from host governments and from international bodies.
- The international community should urge the Royal Thai Government to sign the United Nations Convention on Refugees.
- The UNHCR and resettlement countries should ensure that all people fleeing persecution receive fair and equitable recognition and consideration, regardless of ethnicity.
- Educational and income-generation opportunities for Burmese refugees should be increased to escape dependency on aid and to promote their future contribution to Burma.

*Panel 4:***ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS,
U.N. AGENCIES, AND FOUNDATIONS
IN STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY***Discussion Summary*

A development specialist with experience in Burma offered a broad working definition of civil society as the formal and informal organizations that operates between the individual and the state.

In Burma, he observed, there have been severe restrictions on the formation of civil society organizations for over three decades since the imposition of military rule in 1962. Only a few sanctioned groups are allowed to operate outside the purview of the state. Some religious organizations and foreign NGOs are permitted to function in limited capacities.

Most regime-sanctioned domestic NGOs are not really independent, and might be best described as "GONGOs — government-organized non-governmental organizations." Some other NGOs are affiliated to political and ethnic groups.

The impact of NGOs in Burma is quite small. The "enabling environment" for their operation simply does not exist, despite the many problems they might effectively address. In contrast, in neighboring Thailand, over 1,000 development-oriented NGOs are registered. There is little institution and capacity building for NGOs in Burma today. Creative means to foster institution-building should be sought.

A serious obstacle to NGO formation is the lack of experience of the younger generation of Burmese regarding the working of civil society and NGOs, suppressed during the past 36 years of authoritarian rule in Burma. The deterioration of the country's educational systems also means there are few young people with crucial management skills and technical training. Older generations of Burmese, who acquired such skills before the 1962 military coup and the imposition of the "Burmese Way to Socialism," are an important resource for re-introducing them.

Limited community-based organizations and informal groups, such as Parent-Teacher Associations, might be seedbeds for expanded civil society and NGO activity. Local religious-based groups and social service organizations also often have greater room for action than secular civil society organizations (CSOs). Some have programs that include participatory approaches to development projects.

Some ethnic groups have established their own schools, which in the case of the ethnic Chinese minority are defined as "Buddhist" schools. Other ethnic groups operate hostels for students attending government schools, and privately teach their own language and cultural history.

About 15 international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are working in Burma today. Others have sought to work in the country, but negotiation of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the junta is difficult and time-consuming. Most INGOs are working in the relief and

health areas, and see response to the most immediate and dire needs as their first priority. Some have included participatory approaches in their work, but this aspect should be more heavily promoted.

A major area of future engagement in a more open situation should be education, although this is a politically-sensitive topic in the current atmosphere.

The development specialist offered an outline of means to promote civil society and positive social change in Burma. They can be classified into short-term and long-term efforts, and according to those that can be presently undertaken within Burma. Different international groups may choose to work with different groups inside Burma, or those along the country's frontiers or in exile further afield.

"The military junta remains suspicious of foreign involvement in Burma, including the activities of international NGOs and the UN agencies. Low-profile and informal approaches may be most effective, and work by Asian NGOs may be accepted more easily."
— Development aid worker

Long-term projects might focus on primary education inside Burma, while a short-term view might emphasize immediate political change. Integrated development projects are likely more sustainable than single-issue projects. Working within Burma today largely requires cooperation with the junta or with ethnic ceasefire groups, while more NGOs exist among refugee groups. To the extent possible, low-profile and informal approaches may be more effective than high-profile approaches. NGOs cooperating with groups in exile may choose to take on more public and higher profile approaches than would NGOs working inside Burma. Though difficult, opportunities may exist to work with a variety of informal groups concerned about social issues in Burma.

Another international aid worker with recent experience in Burma said that the interactions between state and civil society in Burma today must be considered in the context of the contracting economic environment and the restrictive statist environment, both of which tend to limit opportunities for civil society growth.

Burma's economy is near shambles, as general infrastructure, education and social services continue to deteriorate and are increasingly unavailable to the vast majority of people. The public sector has essentially collapsed. The "Asian flu" of the regional economic slowdown is hitting Burma as well.

This is a serious challenge for CSOs, and only the strongest institutions can survive. In Burma today, this means groups with affiliation to the state, religious bodies, or ethnic groups. Each of these categories have strong membership criteria which create "inclusion and exclusion" factors.

Development-oriented CSOs face great challenges in operating in this milieu, and in seeking to ensure that aid reaches the poorest. Efforts to achieve broad contact with disadvantaged groups are necessary. CSOs can aim for long-term change by building social capital through norm-

setting and greater trust in society. But there is need for a sound legal framework for CSOs to develop quickly and effectively.

The situation for refugees and minority ethnic groups affected by conflict and human rights violations inside Burma creates special difficulties. It was noted that because of the trans-border nature facing those wishing to help Burmese affected by war and repression, important questions of access must be considered. The Thai Government's new restrictions on education above the primary level for refugees was described as pressure to force their return to Burma.

"UN agencies working in Burma may be pursuing what seem to be different policies because each has its own director and board and does not answer to the Secretary-General, who has a clear mandate to seek democracy in Burma."

— Asian Burma specialist

The role of the United Nations in the ongoing refugee crisis and its operations within Burma attracted several comments. In Rakhine State, UNHCR is involved in teaching basic numeracy to returned Rohingya refugees, but there are few educational resources available. Coordination of the activities of various UN agencies is difficult, since the Secretary General cannot dictate policy to FAO, UNDCP, UNDP, UNICEF, and WHO, each of which have independent boards and make their own policy decisions.

Similarly, member states have separate ministries which are often the liaison to different UN agencies on a functional basis, and a member state's foreign policy position may not be fully or accurately conveyed to specialized UN agencies.

Overall, there is relatively little United Nations presence in Burma despite its status as a UN-designated "least developed country" (LDC). Different UN agencies have taken differing approaches on the ground in Burma. Most UN agencies are working directly with their regime counterparts. The United Nations Development Programme has a mandate to implement its Human Development Initiative using grassroots approaches and has sought to work directly with local communities and affected populations, efforts that are sometimes proscribed by the prevailing political situation. The WHO, on the other hand, works almost exclusively through the Ministry of Health in Rangoon.

An aid worker agreed that there is little apparent coordination among UN agencies working in Burma. He said it must be accepted that working with the repressive regime is a requirement if working within Burma, as in some other countries. He warned, however, that UNDP may merely be bringing a bad system to the grass roots by working with the military authorities on development. The absence of a proper framework for NGO activities imposes serious constraints on NGO activities.

Another aid worker commented that the regime is especially suspicious of Western NGOs' motives. There is a tendency for the regime to be more tolerant of Asian NGOs. Some Western NGOs have been waiting for over two years after receiving initial project approval to finalize MOUs. p

Looking Ahead:**STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY**

- Increased research and access to information is required to understand and address basic social needs and the role civil society organizations (CSO) could play in Burma's development.
- The legal and political "enabling environment" for CSO operation must be improved before they can effectively organize and contribute to Burma's development.
- Efforts should be made to coordinate work by, and to build broader coalitions among, international groups assisting Burmese CSOs.
- Focus on grassroots CSOs and horizontal linkages should be increased to encourage integrated development projects.
- Opportunities to work with religious groups on development issues should be sought.
- Governments and NGOs should encourage UN agencies to facilitate formation and capacities of Burmese CSOs.
- CSOs can play a vital role in conflict resolution, especially in communities long divided by civil war, and their capacities to do so should be promoted.
- CSOs that work on cultural preservation may be a viable entry point for CSO formation/cooperation within Burma that may be tolerated by the current regime.
- Educational materials regarding civil society and CSO operation should be developed and disseminated through all available media, including in ethnic minority languages.
- A comparative study of NGO formation in Cambodia under an authoritarian/transitional regime might provide lessons for Burma.

*Panel 5:***THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PROMOTING CIVIL SOCIETY***Discussion Summary*

A Burmese media practitioner observed that Burma's official media is no more than a mouthpiece for the junta, and there is little or no independent news reporting within Burma. Because of this, foreign-based radio news services are trusted as the most reliable sources for accurate news, and face little competition in attracting a Burmese audience, except among themselves.

The British Broadcasting Corporation Burmese Service seeks to attract listeners not only with news, but also with specialized programming that addresses political and development issues. Programs on maternal health, drug education, AIDS awareness, and a ten-part series, "The Road to Democracy," have been broadcast. There has been follow-up by producing some of these materials in print form, as well.

Broadcasts encourage people within Burma to express their feelings and contact the BBC, but three main obstacles to open and reliable communications are fear, a lack of trust, and the prevalence of rumors that are hard to confirm, or sometimes to deny.

A Thai editor remarked that Thailand's transition to greater democracy offers relevant experience and suggests practical steps that may be taken to encourage long-term press freedom in Burma. In Thailand, media has played an important catalyst role in promoting civil society. In Burma today, however, there is not a conducive environment for an open media.

"Training of Burmese in journalistic skills and management techniques should start now so that Burma's media can take up a watchdog role when the country returns to democracy."

— Asian journalist

The quality of Burmese media may be improved in the long run through training programs now. Burmese media practitioners from within Burma and living outside its borders should be helped to find internships on regional newspapers in Southeast Asia. They should also learn media management skills, including production, finance and marketing, in an environment similar to that in which they will have to work.

In Southeast Asia, generally, the press has not firmly established itself in the role of a watchdog over government and society that is a key component of open societies. In Indonesia, the press could be called a "benign watchdog." In Singapore, the media is more a "collaborative watchdog." In Thailand, the press is very vigorous, and is a "mad dog" watchdog. In Burma, Laos and Vietnam, the press is still almost entirely controlled, and can be called "running dog" watchdogs.

In all these countries, real press freedom requires a broader and deeper civil society in which to take root. In Thailand, people distrust all official media from long experience with disinformation or biased and incomplete reporting offered by state-controlled or influenced media. The independent media is expanding, however, and will soon include 427 radio stations that are being privatized by the Thai military. The private "Voice of Free Asia" station in Bangkok now broadcasts reports critical of the Burmese junta.

The work of NGOs on Burma issues is important, but information NGOs provide media is often unsystematic and not easily used. NGOs should make greater efforts to reach local media in an organized and timely manner. They should realize that local newspapers do not have large resources, and so should advise them well in advance of events such as publication of a report if hope for coverage. There should be efforts to present more information about Burma than the usual news stories, including information on culture, food and lifestyle.

A Burmese journalist said that media must be credible and reliable in order to play its proper role in civil society. Freedom of the press should be respected, he said, but warned that this does not equal license to publish anything at all. The press should seek to be constructive, but must also be responsive in a market setting. Media should make genuine efforts to assist people in making their lives better by promoting constructive and "enlightened" understanding. Training and education for media is crucial. The BBC has taken the lead in this field around the world.

Radio Free Asia, a journalist pointed out, should not be considered "democratic" radio. It seeks to provide a forum for free expression and free information for people within Burma. For example, RFA broadcasts a program on what is reported in Burma's official media in the form of a "letter" to a friend in Burma. It also broadcasts poems sent by Burmese listeners without giving the names of the writers.

Great care must be taken to ensure external reporting into Burma is not "loose cannons," which would make the reporting no more believable than the junta's state media. Credibility, with unbiased and balanced reporting, is a first concern. Popularity is a secondary concern.

Another long-term observer of Burma's media noted that the regional media in ASEAN has increased its skills and experience even under repressive conditions and economic difficulties. ASEAN countries have more bi-lateral and multi-lateral resonance with Burma than Western countries. For example, an Indonesian reporter interviewing Aung San Suu Kyi would find parallels with Indonesian democracy leader Megawati, as both are daughters of their country's independence leader, General Aung San and Sukarno, respectively.

The nascent indigenous Burmese business press that is allowed to publish was described as a potentially important step toward an open media in Burma. It is widely read and offers accurate information. However, it is also sometimes censored, and certainly exercises extensive self-censorship. These business publications may be tolerated, it was suggested, because they publish some news that is useful to investors. Finding ways to assist independent media in Rangoon would be useful in the long term, and there may be more opportunities for small publications which use new technologies for production.

Another Burmese participant expressed concern that while the few independent publications offer interesting business news or creative writing, it is possible that republishing their work internationally could put the writers or publishers in danger, simply by drawing attention to them as a source of information from Burma.

"Independent media inside Burma should be promoted wherever possible, and increased efforts to broadcast information about crucial topics in ethnic minority languages should also be made."

— Burmese journalist

Efforts to expand external radio broadcasting in ethnic minority languages was considered an important new priority. The Philippines-based "Radio Veritas" operates now in Karen on a regular basis. RFA is beginning broadcasting in ethnic minority languages in the near future. Difficulties are in finding broadcasters who speak these languages well, as well as a general problem of trying to cover many priorities with limited resources.

Both RFA and DVB expect their audiences in Burma will continue to expand as reception of their broadcasts in the country improves through use of new transmitters. Until there is an open and credible domestic media in Burma, such foreign radio broadcasts are likely to remain the main and most trusted news source for most Burmese. ρ

Looking Ahead:

MEDIA & CIVIL SOCIETY

- Training of Burmese journalists should be considered in a regional context, with internships, preferably in ASEAN countries, to gain journalistic and media management skills.
- Journalists inside Burma who would be allowed to leave the country for training should be identified, and training opportunities for Burmese already outside the country should be increased.
- More broadcasting in ethnic minority languages by external radio services should be encouraged. Programming on AIDS, drugs, the sex trade, and cultural preservation and other priority issues should be made available in ethnic languages.
- NGOs and other groups should improve their communication with the media, offering timely and useful information. These groups should be offered training in media relations.
- UN agencies should be urged to practice greater transparency and offer greater access to media and academic and other researchers.

Panel 6:**EDUCATION AND HEALTH: RESTORING LITERACY
AND LEARNING; DEVELOPING PRIMARY HEALTH CARE*****Discussion Summary***

A development aid worker noted that deficiencies in health care and the educational system are widespread throughout Burma, and are particularly acute in special situations such as war zones and areas of environmental degradation. The militarization of ethnic minority areas, where there are sometimes tenuous ceasefires or still open warfare, must be considered when formulating development priorities and projects.

The need for a national health plan is clear, but as in many other sectors, there are no reliable statistics to utilize in developing a targeted and effective response. There may be 105 infant deaths per 1000 live births, as reported by UNICEF, but there is no way to know this is accurate, and the figure may be even higher. Official AIDS statistics highly unreliable. A better indicator, one Burmese said, was to look at the cemeteries in country's worst-affected areas, where most new graves were of people in their 20s and 30s. There is some new information available from UN agencies and international nongovernmental organizations, but it is inconsistent in collection and dissemination.

Available social indicators appear to reflect Burma's status as a UN-designated least-developed country (LDC). Primary education, vocational training, and tertiary institutions have all suffered since the imposition of military rule in 1962, and continue to deteriorate. According to recent surveys, 40% of schoolchildren are malnourished. Yet is perhaps more alarming that treatable maladies continue to cause most deaths, notably tuberculosis and gastro-enteritis. Many young women die of complications from illicit abortions.

"A new phenomenon in Burma is street children in Rangoon and other major cities. Increasing poverty and very high school fees are helping create the problem, and many of the children are malnourished and using drugs."

— Development aid worker

A new generation of problems is appearing as a result of increased drug use, AIDS, and social pressures of rising urban and rural poverty. AIDS is spreading fast among all groups. Prostitution is increasing, and street children are part of a new urban underclass.

The trend is exacerbated by sharply rising school fees, with even government schools demanding fees of 3,000 kyat yearly or more. Schools demand "donations," which are effectively bribes of 100,000 - 200,000 kyat, for entry to better schools, plus payment of all other fees. Decent education is being priced beyond the range of civil servants, who earn no more than 2,500 kyat monthly. There has been a sharp expansion of very costly private "Chinese" schools.

The response by government ministries responsible is constrained both by politics and by a dearth of resources. Local standards are falling as the much-better trained pre-1962 generation of

educators and administrators retire. Their successors are generally less-qualified and have never worked in an open environment. The problem will worsen as economic opportunities outside the official arena open and the best-qualified and most energetic of people still in government service seek much more lucrative opportunities in the private sector.

Limited change is evident in Burma today, including some new economic opportunities, the arrival of several international nongovernmental organizations, and ceasefires that have altered the social landscape for many ethnic minorities. A great challenge is to make best advantage of these changes through integrated approaches that include both official agencies and other sectors.

A researcher who has studied Burma's health and education systems remarked that the need for educational and health reform are immediate. The junta is aware of the gravity of health problems in Burma, but security remains its main priority. Increased research and comparative studies are needed to increase understanding and ensure any eventual reforms are effective. UNICEF has helped provide more information on basic health needs, and encouraged the junta to agree to accede to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, extensive studies and open discussion of them are unlikely without greater freedom of expression.

Conflict resolution is a key to real advances in education and health. AIDS and malaria are severe in many ethnic minority areas, and there is little work being done to ameliorate these problems.

Another researcher explained that opportunities for quality post-graduate education in Burma are dwindling. The educational system has atrophied and it is difficult to find individuals qualified to enter graduate level programs outside Burma. The cessation and resumption of English teaching during Ne Win's rule has helped create gaps in capabilities.

Since the September 1988 coup, the universities have been shut for long periods. The 1996 academic year was only three months, and most universities have become little more than degree mills. Social Service faculties have been badly hit. There are today only a handful of highly-trained social workers in Burma.

The junta has licensed private English language and computer training classes, but the instructional levels of these private schools is uneven and often low, and books and other training materials are lacking. They schools are also often very expensive, charging as much as 5,000 kyat monthly.

Study abroad is not barred, but difficult to arrange and for most people, prohibitively expensive. Passports are costly and visas to the USA and other developed countries hard to acquire. There is little access to accurate information about international study. Many agents are touting low quality, unaccredited courses abroad.

"The root causes of the deterioration of our country's health services and educational system is the military dictatorship. Massive military expansion is crowding out social spending."
— Burmese economic researcher

Another hurdle to admission to American universities looms because the TOEFL exam, a standardized international test used to gauge student's English-language proficiency, may be

discontinued in Burma because of a lack of computer access. Assessing Burmese students' qualifications is very difficult, given the prevailing state of Burma's universities. Making international educators aware of Burma's particularities would be useful. Burmese students should be helped to gain better information about international educational opportunities. Possibilities to assist private schools that operate outside government purview should be explored. Promoting university exchanges, especially with other ASEAN countries, could be useful.

A Burmese researcher commented that it is essential to keep in mind the root causes of the crisis in education and health care. The junta's heavy military expenditure has a crowding out effect on health and educational spending. Working on health projects and assisting schools will address symptoms but not the base reasons for seriously deteriorating health and educational services. There must be efforts to complement a development track that meets people's basic needs with a political track for long-term change. A Burmese student leader argued that health and education issues cannot be addressed piecemeal. They must be confronted as a governance issue on a national level with popular participation.

The junta does not value education, another participant suggested, perhaps because its members are themselves little educated. The junta is neither elected nor a meritocracy. There is only one university graduate among the junta's members.

Several speakers raised the questions of the impact of international sanctions. One development worker drew a parallel to Burma today with conditions in Cambodia in the wake of Vietnamese withdrawal and end of Soviet aid in 1990. The public sector is contracting and near collapse, and stricter sanctions may cause a further decrease in state capacities. Another participant asked whether sanctions will impair capacity to maintain even limited societal structures in health and education.

A Thai participant suggested that exchanges through monasteries, scholars, and traditional medical practitioners could help encourage greater openness. A new Buddhist University to open in Burma may provide such an opportunity. ρ

Looking Ahead:**EDUCATION AND HEALTH**

- There is a clear need for fresh and reliable base line data on Burma's current health and education realities. UN agencies and NGOs with such data should make it available publicly. Among the information needed is that on tertiary educational opportunities within and outside Burma.
- Humanitarian and development organizations should seek the broadest possible participation in efforts to promote sharing of experience and coordination of assistance.
- Community-based approaches to improved health care should be encouraged, especially regarding primary health care, women's health and HIV/AIDS awareness as well as sanitation and disease control. Education in the community is a vital component in such work.
- Vocational skills training as well as modernized reform of the tertiary sector should be prioritized in tandem with political reform.
- More health and education materials should be translated to ethnic minority languages as well as Burmese and be made available in border areas, and be broadcast on external services to Burma.
- International monastic networks should be encouraged to undertake educational programs inside Burma and to establish exchange programs.
- An education workshop with broad participation from within and outside Burma could help promote new thinking and jump-start the reform process.
- NGOs working inside Burma should increase their transparency and better coordinate with each other.

*Panel 7:***PRESERVING BURMA'S RESOURCES:
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION & HISTORIC PRESERVATION***Discussion Summary*

Libraries and archives are vehicles for cultural transmission, observed a foundation representative working in Asia, and are especially important in countries experiencing fast modernization and attendant societal changes. Promoting preservation of archives, and encouraging transmission of cultural traditions and languages, requires commitment of energy and scarce resources. The effort is further complicated under conditions where freedom of expression is repressed and language and culture are venues for competition or conflict.

Environmental change is often the nexus for cultural change in developing countries. A Thai participant said that most of the forest in Thailand disappeared over the past 30 years, and caused profound economic and cultural change. Now the same process is well underway in Burma. This is in part caused by the sale of national natural resources as the basis for development.

If Burma is today influenced by the Thai example, it was once the other way around. The Siam Department of Forestry was set up with help of British imperial administrators in Burma. Under British rule, Burma's natural resources were exploited for the benefit of the crown. Under the military junta, since the late 1980s, Burma's once respected forestry management system is today in collapse, felled by opportunistic clear-cutting in border areas which has benefited only the military, certain armed opposition groups and foreign business interests, principally in Thailand and China. Fishery resources have been severely over-exploited by foreign fishing fleets that have paid substantial fees to the military regime.

The situation on the Thai-Burma frontier is changing faster today than ever before. For the last 400-500 years, Thais maintained good ties with Mon and Karen as a buffer state against Burman expansion. After late 1988, ties with Rangoon improved as Thailand sought to import more raw resources for value-added exports. Through 1993, Thai companies clear cut huge areas of Burmese forest.

*"The effects of over-exploitation of Burma's forests
and other resources are now being felt beyond its borders.
Constructive engagement is boomeranging against
those who sought quick profits."
— Thai academic*

Military regimes in Thailand and Burma have been committed to economic growth. But there is today rethinking of development goals. Thai authorities saw clear-cutting of Burmese forests as only a Burmese problem. But today the effects are being felt in Thailand and elsewhere in the region. Constructive engagement is now boomeranging. Yet there apparently remains little short term hope for the preservation of Burma's environment, unless effective international pressure is mounted.

A Burmese participant noted that international environmental groups such as World Wildlife Fund, New York Zoological Society and the Smithsonian are mounting expeditions and encouraging ecological preservation in Burma. However, the effect of these programs on the human population is not clear and should be fully assessed.

A specialist in cultural issues explained that even in dire humanitarian and political situations, there is a need to preserve and sustain cultural systems. An opportunity to do so arose in the form of a project to preserve the records of a minority culture. This project was launched after a trove of old photographs taken by an British imperial army officer stationed in northern Burma in the 1920s was donated to an overseas museum.

Among certain ethnic groups, transmission of cultural information from generation to generation is performed by priests who offer recitations which sometimes last for days. Disruptions of modernization and political and economic crisis can break the transmission chain.

Visits to Burma have been made to work with local researchers who have recorded oral histories and learn more about the images in the photo archive. People have responded very positively and helped "animate" archive photos by providing cultural and historical context. Training and support for oral history recordists is necessary to expand and preserve knowledge of ethnic history and tradition. A challenge expressed by local researchers is how to reintroduce this heritage to areas where it has faded.

This is so far a narrow and very informal project, linked to a specific historical archive. There are many other archives that depict the history and traditions of various peoples in Burma. These could be similarly employed to help record or re-establish chains of transmission of traditional knowledge.

"Preservation of cultural traditions and recording of minority languages is especially crucial in the face of modernization, but very difficult in areas of conflict."
— Cultural preservation specialist

A Burmese academic noted that the earliest translations of Burmese language books were of accounts of military expeditions. In the 1960s, a series of bilingual translation books of Burmese and various ethnic languages were prepared, but never published. Currently, there is little capacity in Burma to undertake such studies; today there are probably less than ten properly trained linguists in Burma.

The languages of some of the smaller ethnic groups are disappearing. A Ph.D. student from the University of Rangoon recorded one of them in 1975, but it is unknown how many others have disappeared. The roots of the more ancient languages can no longer be traced, but can perhaps be related to the more contemporary ones.

The preservation of minority languages is an urgent priority. Recording the language is not very difficult, but analyzing it requires extensive fieldwork. This is best done by local scholars who are conversant with local customs and can deal with local authorities. There is a need to train

more Burmese students in these areas abroad. A logical place, another participant suggested, might be at educational institutions in Chiang Mai.

A development worker recently in Burma warned that cultural heritage in the form of antiques and artifacts are being sold off in face of economic desperation. Another participant suggested that sponsorship be sought in-country or externally to buy antiques for public collections. A Burmese academic thought this would be a good idea, but private resources would be necessary, since the regime still appears uninterested in cultural preservation. ρ

Looking Ahead:

ENVIRONMENTAL/CULTURAL PRESERVATION

- An inventory of minority languages, and priority efforts to preserve those most at risk, should be undertaken.
- Sharing and networking among experts involved in cultural preservation in the Asian region should be encouraged, with a survey of current projects to assure best use of resources and prevent replication.
- Archives should be collected via informal means if impossible to do so through existing official structures.
- Increased external assistance for archiving should be sought.
- Means to promote preservation and transmission of “apolitical” cultural information should be devised.
- Educational materials on ethnic minority languages and cultures should be disseminated by both domestic publication within Burma, if possible, and by cross-border distribution of materials produced elsewhere.
- Efforts to assure the recording and archiving of current events should be promoted.
- Information on investments in forestry, hydro-electric and other environmentally-sensitive projects should be collected and disseminated.
- Education on sustainable environmental practices should be produced and disseminated in Burmese and ethnic minority languages.

Panel 8:**THE NEXT GENERATION: THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE*****Discussion Summary***

A Burmese student leader recapped the history of student activism against colonial and then military rule in Burma over seven decades. He observed that all the problems discussed during the preceding panels has in common issues of violation of human rights and the lack of respect for ethnic minorities by Burma's army junta.

The student movement and democracy movement has grown in sophistication and understanding since 1988, when a largely spontaneous rising against long-term repression and economic problems nearly toppled the military regime.

The democracy movement needs to gain experience from other popular movements to create a broad-based political defiance campaign inside Burma. Part of the work is to educate people about the nature of their rights and democratic governance.

It is also necessary to conceive long-term plans for rebuilding Burma after the junta is gone. Good relations between the pro-democracy student movement (made up mostly of people of ethnic Burman and urban origin), and ethnic minority groups could be a crucial catalyst for a peaceful and democratic Burma. A consensus constitution-writing exercise is underway to help cement this cooperation.

"We must gain experience from popular movements that have faced dictatorships. But it is also necessary now to make long-term plans for when the junta is gone".

— Burmese student leader

Another student leader said that the country's education system is declining in part due to the military rulers' distrust of educated people. University and school campuses have traditionally been a seedbed and flashpoint for political unrest in Burma. The junta appears willing to simply shutter academic institutions rather than risk open dissent. Universities and most schools have been closed since the December 1996 student protests were suppressed by security forces. Since the army seized direct power in September 1988, universities have been closed more than they have been open, totally disrupting the university education of an entire generation of students.

The junta sets curricula for universities, where the main mission appears to be indoctrination rather than teaching. On threat of dismissal, faculty have been forced to become members of the Union Development Solidarity Association, a junta-backed "mass" organization which has held many rallies across Burma to support the military regime.

Arrests of student activists in Burma continues, with an estimated 200 jailed between November 1996 and March 1997.

A student leader and lawyer argued that a principal problem is lack of respect for the rule of law, and the fact that the junta obeys no law at all. There is today no effective constitution. A new constitution must have support from both Burmans and minority ethnic groups to be successful. Fifty years of civil war has shown that a unitary system will not work in Burma and that a federal system that offers real autonomy and power sharing must be adopted.

The role that students who fled into exile in 1988 might play in a democratized Burma was addressed. Many exile students are receiving valuable training internationally, and would be a great asset to a new administration and more open society. However, it was recognized that there may be a "culture gap" between the experience and perceptions of long-term exiles and people who remained in Burma. Inside Burma, proper education is today little available, and government scholarships to study abroad are normally granted only to the most privileged elite.

*"A principal problem is the absence of the rule of law.
We must have a constitution that is respected
by Burmans and all ethnic groups."
--Burmese student leader and lawyer*

The situation for Burmese exile activists in Thailand is becoming increasingly difficult, with more harassment and rising demands for bribes. Threats of repatriation are more serious, and there seems to be greater cooperation between Burmese and Thai militaries in quietly returning Burmese army defectors to Burma. It was suggested that the UNHCR should take a firmer stand in protecting both students and ethnic minority peoples who have fled persecution in Burma.

A Thai participant suggested that Burmese students in Thailand cultivate wider and deeper links with Thai civil society, including students, academics, NGOs and the media. This could provide some protection for the students from harassment and possible expulsion from Thailand, and would help create stronger links to the international community. This would also build up great awareness of events inside Burma. Training in media skills and public relations would be helpful to this effort. ρ

Looking Ahead:**THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE**

- The decade of experience of ethnic Burman students who fled Rangoon and other cities to border areas in 1988 should serve as an example and basis for reconciliation and understanding among ethnic groups.
- Education and training for exiled students should aim at skills required for rebuilding Burma after the end of the military junta.
- Assessments on how best to reform Burma's educational system to meet the many urgent tasks facing the country in the 21st century should be undertaken.
- Burmese students in Thailand must forge closer ties with Thai students, academics, NGOs and media to build a constituency to protect them against harassment and possible forced repatriation.
- Student and other academic exchanges between Burma's educational institutions, especially those in ASEAN nations and other neighboring countries, should be promoted on a fair and open basis.
- Efforts to improve access to students within Burma must continue with efforts to spread information concerning human rights and democracy.
- Experiences of other countries and movements that have experienced democratic transitions should be analyzed for lessons applicable to Burma.

Conclusion: *LOOKING AHEAD*

Burma's social, economic and political crisis will not be resolved without the active and informed participation of Burma's diverse peoples. Absent consent of the ruled, any government in Burma will likely face insurmountable difficulties in marshaling the popular support and financial resources required to address the country's enormous problems.

There is no doubt that a competent and honest administration accountable to Burma's populace could more productively and rationally develop the country's immense natural and human resources. Yet a more open society with genuine elections is not the only requisite. The political impasse that has led to a half century of insurgency along Burma's borderlands must also be addressed as a threshold to lasting progress. Even a democratically elected government in Burma will need to seek a broad consensus among ethnic minority peoples to realize the peace that is necessary for sustainable democratic development

The Bellagio Conference participants described a daunting array of serious problems facing Burma, and offered solutions ranging from long-term economic and political structural changes needed to build a strong and prosperous democratic Burma, to very pragmatic immediate steps aimed at reducing people's current suffering.

There is no doubt that both kinds of thinking—and both kinds of action—are today necessary. Some groups and individuals are exploring creative ways to assist people in need inside Burma by working around the restrictions of a harsh military junta. However, only a more open and responsive government that commits a preponderance of national resources to social and economic development rather than military spending will permit such efforts to advance beyond stop-gaps that can only slow Burma's long and continuing economic and social decline.

Burma's military junta will not rule forever; hopefully, it will last not much longer at all. The Bellagio conference demonstrated that many individuals and organizations are seriously considering the ways and means to create a better future for a country that has suffered so gravely for more than three decades.

“Rebuilding a Democratic Burma” is not just a dream. It is a goal to which economists, educators, health and development experts and others, Burmese and non-Burmese, are contributing their respective expertise. The Bellagio Conference produced not only a clearer understanding of the problems facing Burma, but a belief that there are real solutions. It also reminded that the exercise of open debate and genuine dialogue practiced at the conference will be necessary in Burma before the country can achieve both peace and its enormous potential. •••

REBUILDING A DEMOCRATIC BURMA *Strategies for Sustainable Development*

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BACKGROUND NOTE

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Democratization or at least the ability to enjoy a responsive government that respects and seeks to serve its citizens' interests is an aspiration shared by peoples worldwide. Yet attaining that goal is most often an arduous and complex task. The scope of institutions and attitudes that must evolve to accept and embed notions of transparency and accountability in governance is daunting. This is especially true in countries which have experienced long periods of authoritarian rule, where respect for due process has often been absent and the growth of civil society has been constrained.

To ensure its long-term success, democratization must advance on a broad front in which citizens become stakeholders with the right to assert responsibility for the functioning of their society. Elections as a technical exercise are, even if free and fair, in themselves clearly not enough. A domestically viable democracy must be underpinned by a vibrant civil society protected by the rule of law. Constitutional guarantees respected by governmental and societal institutions are required to safeguard both individual, minority and group rights, and to avert a potential "democratic" tyranny of the majority. Promoting such transitions is a complex challenge, taking into account historical, political, social, cultural and economic factors.

Democratization and good governance anticipated as one of its fruits also plays a key role in economic growth and sustainable development. Corruption, nepotism, repression and domestic conflict sooner or later the hallmarks of nearly every dictatorship are all serious barriers to economic development. Economic gains can be viewed as a long-term and indirect, but nonetheless highly important, product of the democratization process which includes transparency and accountability in governance. The quality of public administration can also be expected to improve as authority devolves from non-elected and unaccountable elites.

Further, the greater the evolution of democratic institutions, the more likely that domestic disputes, be they political, ethnic, racial, religious or regional, will be resolved by peaceful accommodation. Freedom of association and expression also allows the

proliferation of a free media and civic groups that can monitor government and society and provide early warning of threats to human rights, of potentially harmful environmental or social policies, or even of natural or man-made disasters which the state may choose to ignore or deny.

A closed society may inflict serious damage on itself in several ways. During an emergency, demands for action generated by an open media and civil society organs can pressure government to mobilize resources to meet citizens' urgent needs, which might otherwise may be delayed or refused through administrative incompetence or political calculation. And absent open access to information and free debate on longer-term challenges, improper policy choices or inaction may exacerbate serious problems.

Finally, democratization serves as a form of preventive diplomacy. Democracies tend to go to war less than authoritarian states. Peaceful conflict resolution, within and across borders, avoids the gross human and economic dislocation and suffering violence often evokes. It also reduces the need for military spending that diverts resources desperately needed for development.

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

This global overview of the benefits that responsive and responsible governance can provide carries clear resonance for Burma, and for the task of rebuilding a democratic Burma. The Bellagio conference will seek to bring this broad belief to a more practical level. It aims to identify problems and suggest approaches for realistic long-term solutions that will promote an enduring Burmese democracy in which government will truly serve its peoples. The issues outlined and questions posed in the annotated agenda attached are central to the Burma's future.

While neither exclusive not exhaustive, they are intended to encourage participants to focus on specific topics within their expertise and to offer concrete policy alternatives that may be the basis for serious discussion by all those committed to a better future for Burma.

Democratic transitions of other countries around the world should serve as beacons of hope for Burma, and as a broader context for discussions at Bellagio. They should also be closely scrutinized to provide lessons applicable there. In offering their suggestions, it is hoped that participants will fully explore experiences of countries that have emerged from authoritarianism to seek learning that may be applicable to Burma.●●●

Rebuilding a Democratic Burma
REBUILDING A DEMOCRATIC BURMA
Strategies for Sustainable Development

The Rockefeller Foundation
Bellagio Study and Conference Center
Bellagio, Italy
23-27 March 1998

Agenda

Monday: *Participants arrive at Bellagio Center in the afternoon. Informal dinner followed by a brief welcome and overview of conference schedule by Maureen Aung-Thwin, director, Burma Project.*
 23 March

Evening: Reception and dinner; screening of new Burma documentary

Tuesday: Morning session (after breakfast until lunch):
 24 March

9:15-10:45: **Panel 1: “ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: PROMISING PROSPECTS, MAJOR OBSTACLES”**
(Moderator: Maureen Aung-Thwin)
Mya Maung, Boston College, USA
Zaw Oo (invited), Columbia University

10:45-11:00: Break

11:00-12:30: **Panel 2: “DRUG CONTROL: ILLICIT PRODUCTION, TRAFFICKING, AND DRUG ADDICTION/AIDS”**
(Moderator: Mary Pack)
Mathea Falco, president, Drug Strategies, USA
Hseng Nong Lintner, writer/researcher, Thailand

12:30- 3:30: Lunch, free time

3:30- 5:00 **Panel 3: “CHALLENGES OF GOVERNANCE: ROLE OF THE ETHNIC MINORITIES IN A DEMOCRATIC BURMA — FEDERATION, UNION, OR SEPARATION?”**
(Moderator: Martin Smith)
Chao Tzang Yawngghwe, University of British Columbia
Louisa Benson Craig, Karen National Union, USA

5:00-6:30 **Panel 4: “ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS, U.N. AGENCIES, AND FOUNDATIONS IN STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY”**

(Moderator: **Nina Frankel**)

Steven Lanjouw, former Burma country director, Medecins Sans Frontieres, (MSF)

Evening: Dinner and informal discussions

Wednesday: Morning Session:
25 March

9:15-10:45: **Panel 5: “THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PROMOTING CIVIL SOCIETY”**

(Moderator: **Tom Lansner**)

Kavi Chongkittavorn, The Nation, Thailand

Soe Thinn, Radio Free Asia, Washington, DC

Kyi Kyi May, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, UK

10:45-11:00: Break

11:00-12:30: **Panel 6: “EDUCATION AND HEALTH: RESTORING LITERACY AND LEARNING; DEVELOPING PRIMARY HEALTH CARE.”**

Martin Smith, author and journalist, UK

Nina Frankel, former UNHCR health advisor, USA

12:30- 3:30: Lunch, free time

3:30- 5:00: **Panel 7: “PRESERVING BURMA’S RESOURCES: ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION & HISTORIC PRESERVATION”**

(Moderator: **Mary Zurbuchen**)

Charnvit Kasetsiri, Thammasat University, Thailand

Saw Tun, Northern Illinois University, USA

5:00-6:30 **Panel 8: THE NEXT GENERATION: THE STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE**

(Moderator: **Maureen Aung-Thwin**)

Three exiled Burmese student leaders

Evening: Dinner and informal discussions

Thursday: Morning Session:
26 March

9:15-12:30: Discuss major themes and findings, summarize proposed new directions for strengthening civil society in a democratic Burma.

(Discussion Leader: **Mathea Falco**)

Lunch & Afternoon: Informal meetings and media interviews

Departures 26 and 27 March

OBSERVERS/MODERATORS:

Ms. Mary Zurbuchen, *Ford Foundation*

Mr. Tom Lansner, *rapporteur/Columbia University*

Ms. Mary Pack, *Burma Debate*

Ms. Debby Corper, *rapporteur/OSI*

Ms. Oo Oo Khin, *Education Consultant*

REBUILDING A DEMOCRATIC BURMA
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venue:

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The Burma Project

The Burma Project, established by the Open Society Institute in 1994, is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to increasing international awareness of conditions in Burma and to helping the country make the transition from a closed to an open society. To this end, the Burma Project initiates, supports, and administers a range of programs and activities around the globe including:

- Efforts by and for multi-ethnic, grassroots organizations dedicated to the restoration and preservation of fundamental freedoms, including political, economic, environmental, and human rights for all the people of Burma, regardless of race, ethnic background, age, or gender.
- Education programs for Burmese students, especially those whose schooling was disrupted by the democratic uprising and crackdown of 1988.
- Professional and vocational training for young Burmese abroad who plan eventually to return to live and work in a democratic Burma.

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Drug Strategies

Drug Strategies is a Washington, DC-based not-for-profit research and policy institute working towards new solutions to worldwide problems of illicit narcotics production and use. *Drug Strategies* has produced studies on drug education, treatments, demand reduction and related issues. Drug Strategies conducts an annual review of U.S. Federal drug control spending and identifies promising prevention, education, treatment, and law enforcement programs.

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